

## Active/Passive

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This chapter will introduce you to the debate that exists between sociologists over how they imagine that people are motivated to act in the social world. This can take the form of an active perspective, where it is supposed that people exercise free will and choice, or a passive perspective, where it is supposed that human action is organized by social pressures and constraints that are not of the individual's choosing. In considering the active perspective the chapter will also introduce you to a particular kind of sociological theory called 'symbolic interactionism' and compare it with 'systems theory' and 'structural functionalism'; these approaches are explained more fully in other chapters. Sociologists are involved in a very complex world which is the world of human action. This means that the very thing that they set out to explain and understand, namely how and why human beings behave in the ways that they do once they are members of groups, is itself always emerging, that it is full of meaning and that it carries with it people's choices and their values. Whereas many of the natural sciences investigate things, or phenomena, that are relatively constant, like the geologist's rocks and strata, the physicist's waves and particles, the chemist's elements and combinations of substances, and the mathematician's numbers, sets and forms, the social scientist is confronting a world made up of meaning which changes through time, or history, and according to its different cultural space or location. Now although the activities of natural scientists are by no means as straightforward as my simple sketch might suggest, there is a significant difference in the quality of social phenomena like families, social class, gender, power and ideology, for example, as opposed to rocks, numbers or whatever. Social phenomena

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have a meaning before sociologists investigate them, they are already 'social', whereas natural phenomena are inactive and meaningless until scientists agree to name them and investigate them. Gravity may have always existed as a constant force in relation to the world but it did not become part of our reality and part of our ways of making sense until Isaac Newton 'discovered' it as a pain in the head, and gravity has never 'known' about itself. Men and women, however, have always 'known' that there is a difference between them; all men and women in all societies have always 'known' that some people are more or less powerful than themselves; and all people 'know' that they are closer to their family than to friends, acquaintances or strangers.

Now the point of this explanation of the differences between social and natural sciences is not to suggest that either has a simpler or more difficult task but to show that they each employ different methods for understanding their chosen worlds, or phenomena. This leads us to our current dichotomy, that between the active and the passive. The active and the passive refer to what sociologists call 'models of the actor'. They are an important, but often undisclosed, component in a sociologist's method. We no longer think of sociological explanation in terms of a naive naturalism or a correspondence theory between what is said and what actually exists; what we look towards is some idea of the theorist's place or responsibility for building social worlds.

In order to best typify the distinction between active and passive models of the actor I shall compare and contrast conventional structural sociology and its theoretical grounds with the assumptions that ground the theory of symbolic interactionism. So what we are looking at here, from two different perspectives, are instances of social methodologies generated in relation to perspectives on human conduct. These perspectives find themselves articulated in social theory through different accounts of 'social control' and 'socialization'.

Aaron Cicourel (1964), when writing about the problems that arise in establishing appropriate forms of method and measurement in sociology, states that 'any attempt at theory or any views on method and measurement in sociology presuppose a certain view of the actor' and he demonstrates this through a review and analysis of different methodologies, like participant observation and content analysis, within sociology. A major point of his thesis is that the initial conception of the actor predisposes the character and form of the subsequent theorizing.

Dennis Wrong (1961), writing particularly about Parsonian systems theory and structural functionalism, which he considered to be the dominant and overwhelming theoretical perspective of that period of the 1950s and 1960s, describes the predisposition of such thinking as being organized in terms of an 'oversocialized conception of man'. By this he means that Parsons's somewhat cybernetic way of supposing that actors' conduct is highly and narrowly determined by the universal and fixed constraints of a

social system implies that if such individuals approximate the way that we live in real social life then, far from being free agents, we are rather very rigidly coerced, determined and programmed through our **socialization**, that is, our induction into the rules, the norms and the folkways of modern society. Clearly, Wrong is saying, such 'oversocialized' actors appear to have lost, abandoned or been deprived of the important elements of choice and free will in the world as designed by Parsons. In Parsons's social system it is generally predicted that the limits of the system are the limits of action. What Parsons is generating here, in terms of our original dichotomy, is a passive model of the actor brought about through strict and inflexible views on social control and individual socialization. Rather than choosing and evaluating a situation, the actor within the Parsonian world always behaves or, we might even say, reacts under constraint. Although systems theory and structural functionalism were certainly dominant styles of sociological reasoning for an extended period, and thus the predominant model of the actor in sociology was a passive one, other alternatives do exist and have come to figure largely within modern sociology.

If we view the body of work within the tradition of sociology we will find that although the typical models of the actor exist, in reality, along a spectrum, the two predominant conceptions of the active and the passive have established a formal dichotomy. Any review of the range of theories within our discipline would show that, in general terms, sociologists have tended to focus on either one or the other of these two positions, almost exclusively, for empirical and conceptual reasons. This state of affairs has to some extent given rise to a semblance of an almost sectarian fission in the form of the development of two schools of thought. Active and passive are not equivalent to but do equate with the dichotomy between agency and structure, and in a different context the dichotomy between the philosophies of idealism and materialism.

Instancing this very issue, linking models of the actor with theories of action and philosophies of being, Alan Dawe (1970) suggests that in essence there are 'two sociologies'. The two predominant modes of sociology derive from two distinct social doctrines coming out of the Enlightenment. The first of these he refers to as the 'doctrine of order', which gives life to the sociology of structural functionalism and systems theory and which is committed to treating social action as being derivative of the system or social structure. The second he refers to as the 'doctrine of control', which provides the basis for the sociology contained within an action frame of reference; in this instance we have the mode of theorizing which views social systems and social structures (in whatever form) as the emergent products or depositions of social interaction.

Cicourel, whom we referred to earlier, acknowledges both the active and the passive perspectives within sociology and says that they can be identified more readily as the traditions of 'socio-psychological' sociology and 'classical' sociology, respectively – which I shall, in a short while,

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compare in the form of 'symbolic interactionism' and 'structural sociology'. Cicourel, unlike Dawe, goes on to suggest that both forms of theorizing stem, in fact, from the same origin; that is, the Hobbesian problem of order. It was Thomas Hobbes's view that the natural disposition of humankind was antagonistic, self-centred and self-seeking, such that if left to their own devices human beings would bring about, inevitably, a war of 'all against all'. Hobbes's solution was to place the control of human action and destiny into the hands of the state, which he symbolized in terms of the ancient mythical giant called 'Leviathan' – the title of his major work. Cicourel expands this original problem and suggests that the problem of order can be negotiated by individuals being constrained from above (passivity) or electing to control themselves by, as it were, contracting into the rules of the society (active). In this way Cicourel sees the problem not so much as a binary choice but as an issue of levels – the levels that modern sociology often refers to as the 'macro' (structure) and the 'micro' (interaction). His work then seeks to link the levels of analysis, while conceding that little other work has been done to demonstrate the relationship between the two levels: he recommends that we might initially describe the measurement problems that arise in attempting to operationalize either or both levels.

Let us now treat these two levels as a binary opposition, that is to say that they are competitive and divergent from one another: this is a more common view in sociology. In this way we can indicate both the strengths and weaknesses and also the appeal of the symbolic interactionists' position (as an active perspective) by showing its distance and difference from more structurally oriented sociologies.

Structural sociologies, like systems theory and structural functionalism, are those which operate, in the broadest terms, with a passive conception of the human actor. Their primary object of analysis is not the individual so much as the totality: they begin with a concern for the wholeness of a society rather than its particular parts. Because of this structural sociologies, those with a passive perspective, start off by arguing that it is social structures or abstract social systems that cause people to act in the way that they do, and similarly they end up explaining the purpose of people's action in terms of what it contributes to, or indeed how it maintains, the social structure or social system. This is partly what Durkheim had in mind when he said that the social should always be explained in terms of the social.

As you might imagine from this passive perspective, if it is supposed that the structure dominates and dictates action then any theory concerning how people learn to act in a social way is highly deterministic: this is what Wrong, whom we looked at earlier, meant by 'oversocialization'. Socialization, within the passive model, is thus treated as a process of 'absorbing', or 'internalizing', or 'programming': it certainly always indicates a forcible pattern of necessary learning for the social actor. As you will remember, in the social world described by Durkheim the actor is socialized and subsequently guided in his or her conduct by the compulsion of the 'social

facts'. Similarly the actor in Parsons's social system cannot be seen to be adult or rational until they have internalized the central value system, that is the dominant set of ideas that bind all people's behaviour together into a uniformity. Strangely enough then, sociological theories that operate with a passive perspective have great difficulty in explaining childhood or even adolescence because they assume that everybody is either a competent member of a society or a deviant of some sort. Structural sociologies tend therefore to be populated with readily constituted, competent adult members who embody the needs of the social system. Another feature of socialization within a passive perspective is, as a consequence of the above, that it is well regimented, fairly rapid, and once and for all.

If we look now at an active model of the actor, such as is contained within the theory of symbolic interactionism, then we find a very different set of assumptions. Within the active model, instead of viewing people as if they were constantly determined and prey to the constraint of external factors, here we find the individual actor occupying central stage. This factor is heavily emphasized within the theory: the social actor is treated not as a 'puppet' but as a 'self'. From this framework the practice of socialization takes on a very different significance. Rather than being seen as a necessary but deflecting process it is regarded as absolutely central to the interactionist's concerns, and far from being regarded as a transitory stage it is seen rather as a perpetual and self-renewing process within social life. Adopting an active perspective, the individual is considered to be routinely and yet regularly involved in the practice of engaging in new interactional situations and thus learning as he or she lives. The dual ideas that socialization is ongoing or lifelong, and that the point of continuous interactional exchanges is to successfully negotiate their outcome with other actors, point to the twin theoretical origins of symbolic interactionism itself, namely 'evolutionism' and 'pragmatism'. The conceptualization of socialization as being a continuous or lifelong process has given rise to what the interactionists call 'adult socialization': this is one of their central concepts which appears in many of their studies, particularly their studies of occupations, some of which we shall look at later.

The origins of the symbolic interactionist tradition are to be found in a variety of sources, most notably in the works of Charles Cooley, William Thomas and James Baldwin in the USA, and independently in the works of Georg Simmel and Weber's rational *verstehen* sociology in Germany. Clearly, however, the most significant and comprehensive formulation of the position, in the explicit form of symbolic interactionism, is to be found in the collected papers of the American social psychologist George Herbert Mead, the collection appearing under the title of *Mind, Self and Society*. This body of thought has given rise to the large and flourishing American tradition of symbolic interactionism, spreading mostly through the research and teaching of a group of scholars at the University of Chicago (which is why it is often referred to as the Chicago School) such as Everett C.

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Hughes, Herbert Blumer, Howard Becker, Anselm Strauss, Irving Goffman, Blanche Geer, Arnold Rose and Julius Roth.

If we look, for a moment, at the major contribution provided by Max Weber to what we are describing as an active perspective we can see that it was he who most forcefully stressed the absolute uniqueness of human behaviour, but also he whose work systematically advised that the key to understanding society as a whole lay in a detailed understanding of the typical features of individual human action. So, for Weber, the prime concern of sociological investigation is the explanation of meaningful social behaviour. This meaningful behaviour – meaningful in the sense of being intentional or having a purpose – is what has come to be properly referred to as ‘social action’. Following Weber, what sociologists mean by social action is human conduct that has a subjective meaning, indeed a motive, for the individual actor.

Resting on this assumption, a sense of rationality is supposed to be active within human conduct. We think about our concerns, problems, values or needs and then act in ways that we have considered to best achieve the ends that we have appointed ourselves. So we are not talking about animal instinct or stimulus–response kneejerk reactions, but about human, rational action. This rationality, for Weber and the active theorists who follow his inspirations, is descriptive of human action but also a continuous and developing feature of that action itself. Now, if we put these ideas in the context of the dichotomy that we started off with, the active/passive, then we can say that within this perspective individuals are not conceptualized as passive objects that are merely reacting under constraint. On the contrary, what we are offered here is an overwhelming concern with human decision-making and human purpose. Within an active perspective what is paramount is the idea of conscious, thinking subjects, actually planning and carrying out courses of action. We could say that, unlike with the passive perspective where people live in a world ordered and controlled by material forms, by objectivities, here the subjective dimension is in the ascendant.

Within the active perspective our theoretical attention is directed from a concern with global explanations to local explanations, from generalities to particularities, from social totalities or structures to individuals. To put that another way we could say that adopting an active model of the actor requires that we theorists should eschew the monolithic structures or systems that began and ended explanation for the passive model and which were supposed to determine the lives of the puppets or prisoners who supposedly populated them. From the active perspective we should cease to construct what Harold Garfinkel has referred to as ‘cultural dopes’, that is actors who are apparently directed by the rules of a society that they seemingly do not understand, or what Ralph Dahrendorf (1973) has described as *Homo sociologicus*, that is an actor who is essentially comprised of the bundle of role expectations that the sociologist has projected onto

him. The overall message is clear: within the active model of the actor our explanations tend to veer away from unidirectional causality, from the singular determinism and inevitable reductionism of structural sociology.

Symbolic interactionism therefore directs us to address individual actors, but not individuals in isolation as this is a sociological not a psychological theory. Individuals are our topic, but individuals as they relate to one another in the process of interaction. More specifically we might say that the source of interest for interactionism is individuals united in an inter-subjective web or network of meaning: this is a much looser, more fluid and potentially changeable concept than that of a social structure. If we remind ourselves that we are now thinking within an active perspective, one concerned with choice and decision-making, we can then anticipate that any social phenomenon, indeed any social situation, will have potentially different meaning and significance for different individuals. That is, we can anticipate that different actors' interpretations of a situation will vary for a whole spectrum of reasons like, for example, their value systems, belief systems, age, gender, class, nationality, education, interests or even according to where they are standing. The sociality of these different individuals resides in the symbolism, the shared signs or meanings, that contrives to unite them within a more or less coherent definition of the situation of which they are a part.

We might say that the interactionists would argue that to generalize about the constituent features of a society's social structure, like its educational system, its occupational system, its system of stratification and so on, in the way that structural functionalism or systems theory would, is to ignore the basic face-to-face mechanisms of social life. In other words, abstract talk and theorizing about systems and structures fails to recognize the startlingly obvious fact that people practically, or concretely, construct meaningful worlds on a person-to-person, day-to-day basis. Structural sociology with its passive perspective fails to recognize or pay sufficient attention to the significance and importance of ordinary everyday people's ability to attach symbolic meanings to things in their world, to other people in their world, and to the action of themselves and other people in that world. The active perspective seeks for an understanding of the basis of social organization in people's obvious and perceived capacity to manage and control their own circumstances. Any individual, or social actor, demonstrates his or her ability to exercise control by the way in which they assess a situation and then place a definition upon that situation. This is not usually a wholly wilful or capricious activity – we cannot choose to define a block of flats as a banana – but some propagandists might have us believe that a dictatorship is a democracy. The point here is that there are certain social conventions – red lights are always perceived as red and therefore indicating warning or stop – but within and also beyond these conventions people are very powerful in controlling and defining their particular situation. Max Weber, in his essays on sociological method, says

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that the world could be almost anything, it is infinite in its possibilities, but human beings ensure that it is always something and thus produce its stability by defining it and thus exercising control over it. So by defining a situation an actor generates his or her own possibilities, and by so defining that same actor is also exercising control and creating and reproducing the social conditions of control in interaction with other actors.

Meaning, within an active perspective, derives from interpersonal interaction, and it is from this context that the experience of social life as orderly also derives. Actors are not constrained by the search for meaning and thus order at the level of social structure. Actors are not visualized as guessing, or aspiring towards, or acting as automatons in relation to central values or societal norms. In as much as such standards exist they are treated as emerging out of the negotiation and agreement that occurs within interaction. Actors then, are given the responsibility and autonomy of acting according to their own understanding of social life: they are not treated as pawns within a theorist's structural framework. As we have stated before, within the context of conventional sociological terminology, the level of analysis has shifted from the 'macro' to the 'micro', and from the supposed and unavailable to the actual and the available.

So, let us reiterate the two dichotomous positions. The passive model of the actor, contained within structural sociology, takes an idea of a total society as its primary reality, that is, it moves off from a belief in a social reality that has an organic structure to which all individuals, who are members of that society, are subordinate. Society, from this perspective, is treated as a unitary and coherent organization which, for the purposes of analysis within structural functionalism or systems theory, can be broken down into its interrelated constituent parts. Thus when analysing a particular society one might look at the different institutions, the essential relations between them, and their total functional contributions to the maintenance of the society as a whole. However, when analysing different societies and comparing them, each particular society would be seen in terms of its different level of systems development, just like comparing the heights or weights of growing children: thus such sociology develops a language of 'simple' and 'complex' societies, or 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' societies. Beyond this, the more 'advanced' societies, with their functioning systems, are spoken about in terms of their 'convergence', clearly implying an increased tendency towards similarity at the 'macro' level of systems development.

In contradistinction, the active perspective entreats us to take not society but humankind and its ability to choose and perceive as the primary reality for sociological analysis. Within this view of the actor the idea of institutions is grasped and understood but not as fixed and autonomous, albeit functional, entities. Rather, institutions are to be understood in terms of regularized, conventional, crystallized patterns of interaction. To put that another way we might say that for the active perspective institutions are



there, they are real, they do contain and constrain human action, but they are there as a result of the history of human interaction, they are embodiments of human choice and perception: they are not 'God-given'.

Within the passive perspective, the question of order is understood from above, that is, with direction, constraint and organizational principles moving downwards from universal standards, social norms and central values to the level of interaction. By contrast, within the active view of the actor, order is addressed almost exclusively with reference to social relationships: thus we would consider how order is achieved through the initiation, maintenance and alteration of face-to-face social encounters.

If we can change our focus for a moment, it is interesting to note that despite the wide divergences between sociologies that are informed by or rest upon models of the actor which are either active or passive, it is nevertheless the case that both seats of sociology also have something in common. They do not regard themselves as merely abstractions; they both have strong senses of the 'real world' and they are both dedicated to getting to grips with the 'real nature of things social'. Thus both perspectives, to some extent, trade on common-sense assumptions about the way things are in the world, they both take their implicit views of the world for granted, and to this degree they can both be understood as forms of 'positivism'. Positivism is discussed elsewhere in greater detail (see 'Subject/Object'), but essentially it can be understood as any form of knowledge which takes the world at face value, which uses direct observation to address the world rather than any intervening conceptual framework, which has little time for any questions of value in relation to the validity of its own statements, and finally which believes that the methods of 'science' best encapsulate all of these principles.

We might go as far as to say that a systems theory, such as that of Talcott Parsons, is marginally less positivistic in as much as it is an abstraction, or what is sometimes referred to as a 'heuristic device' – that is, a concept employed by a theorist to conceptualize the way that things are arranged in the world. Symbolic interactionists, on the other hand, often assume that the ordinary member of society operates exactly like the theorist suggests, that their own theory accurately photographs or perfectly describes the way people act. It would be as if sociologists and all people live together in a state of 'symbolic interaction'.

Before we move on to a consideration of the theory of socialization that stems from an active, symbolic interactionist's perspective, let us finally reform our dichotomy. The passive approach looks at social structure as the object of examination and therefore tends to ignore the significance of meaning and interpretation at the level of the actor. In the active approach, on the other hand, there is a tendency to underplay or assume social structure, quite often in terms of a very diffuse yet highly explanatory concept like the 'definition of the situation' (this, for the interactionists, constitutes the stage upon which action takes place); the concern is rather

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with approaching social phenomena from the actor's perspective. In many ways one perspective takes for granted what is problematic for the other – or in more formal terms, the dependent variable of one constitutes the independent variable of the other. Perhaps what we should realize, as with the seeming split or irreconcilable gap formed by so many established dichotomies, that the reality lies somewhere in tension between the two poles and that no one argument originating at one end can produce the complete picture. This is a most important point to learn because within the context of this dichotomy active/passive, for example, it often appears that the active perspective has a more sympathetic, subtle, accurate, empowering, and even critical view of the actor and her or his capacity to understand and change the world. The revolution proposed by Karl Marx could not be brought about by actors who were anything but active, critical, conscious, choosing and so on. However, preceding this state of affairs, preceding 'revolutionary consciousness', Karl Marx was required, with telling accuracy, to describe a capitalist society populated by passive, recipient, yielding, ordered and constrained actors who were wholly guided in their thoughts, words and deeds by the systems of dominant values and the structure of functional 'ideological' thought which you will consider elsewhere.

We may now proceed to an investigation of the interactionists' theory of 'socialization' which, as was stated at the outset, along with theories of social control, is always a key to whether a theory is operating with an active or a passive perspective. Socialization, for the symbolic interactionists, is a process of the development and subsequent regeneration of the 'self'. Self is an absolutely central concept. Herbert Blumer has stated that a human being is an organism in possession of a 'self', and what he is meaning here is that the 'self' is a unique property of being human and, indeed, its major distinguishing characteristic. It is the symbolic possession of a self that renders the human being a special kind of actor. The possession of a 'self' transforms the human individual's relation to the world and gives it an original and peculiar character.

In asserting that the individual has a 'self' the symbolic interactionists mean that humankind is able to reflect upon itself, both as a general feature of any situation that it inhabits, and as a particular identity. Animals, it is supposed, do not have this capacity. The human individual is able to regard himself or herself as both an object and a subject in the world: in the terminology of George Herbert Mead, the human 'self' is 'reflexive'. The human actor, as a **reflexive self**, may perceive him/herself, communicate with him/herself, and act towards or in relation to him/herself. In sum, the human actor as a reflexive self is able to become an involved object of his/her own subjective course of action.

Through the capacity of a reflexive self the individual becomes centred and thus stands, knowingly, in relation to personal sensations and thoughts like wants, pains, fears, goals and aspirations, but also in relation to the

non-personal like the objects in the world which surround him or her. Most significantly, in terms of social life and social action, through the continuous ability to 'reflect' the individual actor learns to perceive him/herself in relation to the presence of other people, their actions and their expected actions. So, apart from forming a strong and centred sense of his or her own identity the individual learns to classify his or her own form of existence and self-presentation as a reflection of the responses that other people make to his or her behaviour. This is a process that the symbolic interactionists refer to as 'identification' or 'self-definition'. It is a process of collectively constructed self-awareness brought about cumulatively through the responses of others in interaction. The process gives rise to what Cooley has described as the development of a 'looking-glass self', that is, we grow to see ourselves as others see us, we become aware of how we are for others. The mirror metaphor is not, of course, specifically accurate as such reflected images are reversed; however, the point is a good one. We come to know things about our presence in interaction that affect people in predictable ways – but not all!

Through this continual process of interacting with the self, of perceiving directly in relation to the self, but of also seeing the self as others might see it, the individual is strategically placed to plan, organize and carry out his or her own courses of action. The individual actor can act towards others specifically in relation to his or her own presence. As Blumer (1969) has put it: 'Possession of a Self provides the human being with a mechanism of self-interaction with which to meet the world – a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding his conduct.' So the interactionists also seem to be saying that the human capacity to symbolize always instances the otherness of things or other people. Interactionism then is described as a real and practical capacity of human being, it is alive in the minds and practices of real active people; the social world may be regarded as a unified collection of interacting reflexive selves. The manner in which people escape 'solipsism', that is the belief that the self is all that is the case, is through a sustained concentration on defining the self, not in isolation, but as an object in a world of similar objects. It is as if the individual provides for others, the 'outside', from a strong awareness of self, 'the inside'. The development of the reflexive self through socialization is seen to be brought about by two complementary processes, the first being the attainment of a language, learning to speak, and the second being the practical experience of interacting with other people. These two processes can be recognized as the 'symbolic' and the 'interactive': hence 'symbolic interaction'.

The interactionists understand initial or 'primary' socialization taking place through a series of loosely defined stages. It must be emphasized that these stages are theoretically descriptive rather than normatively and chronologically prescriptive in the way that, say, Jean Piaget's steps in human physical and mental development are laid out. At a preparatory stage the human infant is treated as being born non-social. That is, the baby

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is considered to be an organism, full of potential, but as yet unable to impose sense or meaning upon the world. The infant is initially 'non-reflexive' and passive rather than active. Of course babies have a presence and a series of wants and needs that are expressed as demands, but they are essentially controlled rather than controlling. At the outset the human infant is not able to join in social interaction but, necessarily, that same infant is not born into a vacuum: he or she is born into a social world, a meaningful world, a communicating world, indeed, an environment that is symbolic.

The interactionists are not entirely explicit about the mechanisms by which a child adopts a symbolic repertoire and thus becomes active, but their theory of language acquisition seems to follow rather from the ideas of 'behaviourism', that people learn by responding to particular stimuli. What they suggest is that by virtue of being human and alive the baby will produce a whole range of sounds, gestures and movements, and out of this vast pattern of expressions certain features are selectively encouraged by the parents. In a sense meaning is structured upon them, so, for example, 'ma . . .' and 'da . . .' sounds are applauded and rewarded and become the initial linguistic categories through which the infant attaches meaning to the differentiation between his or her parents.

Following from the 'initial' socialization the interactionists talk about the play stage. It is here that the infant imitates the skills and roles of other people in their immediate environment. By various sets of copying procedures the infant practises all of the regularized patterns of action that are available within the confines of his or her social world. The various roles that the infant plays are unconnected: they consist of diverse aspects of behaviour learned from particular people or 'specific others'. However, within a child's world it is supposed that some individuals will have greater influence on the child than others and these people are referred to as significant others. For the child the most obvious significant others are the parents, but when interactionists are doing studies of adult socialization a significant other might be the person in an occupational situation who teaches a newcomer the important aspects of their new job. Significant others are, then, the most consistently available and strategically important members of one's immediate social world.

At the following stage, which the interactionists refer to as the game stage, the child is seen as becoming more involved, more generally, with other people. By entering into the forms of interaction that are available the child learns, to some degree, what is expected or required of him or her 'generally' by other people. Beyond simply indulging in private imitation of others that he or she has observed, the child is now placed in a position where he or she needs to come to terms with others, to consider others, and to relate to others in the world. It is at this game stage, the stage involving general interaction with others, that the individual finally decentres, abandons solipsism, ceases to regard him/herself as all that there is in the

world. The child is required, by demands from the outside, to alter the view that everything and everybody is part of or an extension of his or her ego. The child is, oddly enough, learning to become an active participant in social life but through a necessary acknowledgement of and adjustment to the 'passifying' constraints of other people. Our original dichotomy between the active and the passive now begins to look less like a pair of radical alternatives and more like a contingency, two aspects of a situation in a necessary, and perhaps even tense, relationship. We have an emergent, active, actor who has achieved this status of being able to choose, decide and evaluate situations in order to act upon them, but only through the acceptance of the idea that he or she is merely part of a situation or a world – and that this world is a shared world, it is populated by others, and these others are conscious and active just like him/herself. This recognition of 'otherness' is the way that the interactionists import an idea of social structure back into their theory. You will remember that earlier we talked about systems theory and structural functionalism both operating with a strong, deterministic concept of structure which directed people's behaviour – so much so that Wrong referred to it as producing an 'oversocialized conception of man' and Martin Hollis (1977) referred to it elsewhere as creating an idea of 'plastic man', the malleable or bendable person. Well, what we have in the interactionists' active perspective is a soft concept of structure, an iron hand in a velvet glove. The interactionists rarely talk about structure but say that individual actors organize their behaviour in relation to a generalized other, which is an extremely broad concept meaning, approximately, all other people and their expectations in an interactional context. Another similar passive or structural concept that the interactionists employ is that of a 'definition of the situation', and if we enter into or take on a definition of the situation it means that as active actors we nevertheless assume a taken-for-granted and consensus view of the way things typically happen in situations like this! Our dichotomy looks like a contingency again.

Let us now complete our account of the interactionists' view of the development of the reflexive and essentially active self. Emerging from the game stage the young person is now viewing him/herself as an active part within situations but is also viewing him/herself in terms similar to those which can be applied to others. The child is perceiving him/herself as situated, interacting with others, interacting on the same terms with self: the child is, indeed, becoming 'reflexive'. George Herbert Mead states that the reflexive self comprises two elements – which neatly fit the dichotomy of the active and the passive into the microcosm of the individual actor's personality. These two elements he refers to as the I and the Me. The 'I' is that inner, personal, essential element of individuality; it is the immediate, continuous and non-reducible different self-consciousness of the particular person. The 'Me' is the organized and routine set of attitudes of other people that each and every individual takes on board through the process

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of socialization. The 'Me' is that aspect of self which is cumulatively available in the social arena; it is that aspect of ourselves, or outside presentation of self, that is most readily communicated with others in interaction. We are both personal and private and also public and shared; we are both active in our conduct but also passive in our responses. In conclusion, it is interesting to note the parallels between the 'I' and the 'Me' and the 'ego' and the 'superego' that Sigmund Freud was writing about at the same historical period.

### KEY CONCEPTS

**ACTIVE** This concept ties in very closely with the idea of agency discussed earlier. It implies that in the process of becoming social members and when exercising that membership the individual is active rather than re-active or done-to. Such an idea of the person rests on the belief that people are constructive in forging their own destinies, given the constraints placed upon them.

**PASSIVE** This concept resonates with the dominant idea of structure in sociology. It implies that individuals receive society in a pre-established form and are relatively powerless to shape their own futures. In this sense they are passive in receipt of the constraints that structure places upon them.

**Socialization** Socialization is a theory concerning how individuals grow and learn into becoming full members of society. Clearly any such theory presupposes a firm grasp of what society is like and it supposes that individuals are brought into that reality whatever their level of activity.

**Reflexive self** This is a concept which comes from the work of G.H. Mead who suggested that all of life is a continuous practice of socialization. The reflexive self, however, is a state of being and identity when the individual realizes that in a whole series of ways they are just like everybody else and they understand the world like everybody else. This realization enables full and free communication to take place because whatever the other persons differences we can assume that they see the world much as we do.

**'I' and 'Me'** These two concepts concerning the development of self derive from G.H. Mead also. The 'I' is the private interior which cannot communicate, and the 'Me' is the public exterior which is dedicated to communication. Between them they provide a sense of the private and the public and the ability to move between the two.