AN IMAGE OF MAN TOWARD AN IMAGE OF SOCIETY

Richar H Ogles, University of Tulsa

Man is a coping animal in two very diffeent senses. If we define coping as use of resources to deal with problems, then coping as experienced by the individual can be distinguished from coping as attributed to the individual by others.

Man can define for himself what his problems are, what resources he has, and whether or not he is effectively drawing on those resources when confronted with problems. Some sociologists label this as coping seen from a subjective point of view. I say that this is coping as the individual *experiences* it. Man constructs his own reality. This is not to say that defining something as real is real in its consequences, but rather to note that individual experiences are real. In this sense of coping, if the individual does not experience some event or situation as problematic, then there is nothing with which to cope. Even if he takes something as a problem, he need not define it as something with which he must cope. He may feel that he has no pertinent resources. When an individual experiences something as a problem and experiences a sense of inadequacy to draw on resources which he considers pertinent, it is appropriate in this sense to say that he is *not* coping.

An alienated person in a capitalist nation can be depicted in terms of this sense of coping. Some college professors, including some sociologists, like many industrial workers, are alienated from their work. Some sociologists experience no meaningful sense of achievement in teaching, writing, or research. Having lost a feeling of pride in their work, they are unimaginative and uncreative. They are literally *unbeings*. They relate to students, colleagues, and granting agencies as objects to be manipulated, since they view themselves as commodities in the academic marketplace. They also experience a lack of resources for bettering their condition. These alienated people are *non-coping* rather than *not* coping, which is a very desperate condition.

The individual faces some problems which are considered problems by others whether or not the individual recognizes them. And others may judge him to lack relevant resources, independent of his own observations.

Thus, we obtain a second sense of coping. Some would call this type of coping *objective*, since it is determined by so-called outside observers. I say that this is coping as attributed by other individuals based on their own experiences.

The attribution of coping, whether in the subjective or the objective sense, entails the experience of persons. We can reasonably say of someone that he is not coping when he obviously has a problem, and is not using apparently available resources. An unmarried woman who finds herself pregnant may try to ignore the problem by secluding herself from social contacts. This cannot solve the problem because help from others is needed. Ignoring a problem will not solve it.

In the face of such common knowledge it will appear outrageously pedantic to describe such a situation in terms of the construction of reality for a person by others. For the pregnant woman, the problem may not be as others have characterized it. What others consider as resources may be altogether outside her knowledge. What is fundamentally wrong with standard objectivism is not ignorance of *normal conditions*, nor of *untoward consequences*. Though both of these difficulties reflect serious problems — the former the insecure foundations of our laws, and the latter the inevitable value judgments in our assertions. The fundamental mistake of standard objectivism is to take the problem as that perceived by an outside observer as the only objective reality. One strategy to make this sound truly objective is to couch predictions in conditional terms, saying, "If she does not take certain precautions, certain consequences have a stated probability." But it does not follow that she will be aware of the antecedent conditions or the stated consequences. If we try to inform her, we can do so only by trying to construct reality for her. For us to succeed, she must experience our presentation as a confrontation with reality as she has constructed it.

Society is a negotiated order among human beings who engage in interpretive understanding of the actions of others in an interactive context of their own feelings, thoughts,

intentions and actions. Note here that society *is* a negotiated order among humans, not that society is the *result* of negotiations among humans. The former connotes the ongoing process of viable social life, while the latter, which is closer to the sociological conception, connotes a static, arbitrarily circumscribed and vaguely delimited domain.

I am talking about humans in interaction with other humans, not about actors who in some mysterious way interact with other actors. The formulation of actors, or of alter and ego in this context is too abstract. Postulation of actors as even analytically separable from human social interaction is logically absurd. In Parsons' theory of action, the actors logically can never be in the same situation because from ego's viewpoint, alter is a social object in his situation, and when the previous alter becomes ego, from his viewpoint the previous ego becomes a social object of his situation. These two actors can never interact in the *same* situation, even from the outside observer's point of view, since this observer has also to be considered an actor.

If one imagines that the Parsonian difficulty is comparable to Einstein's problem of simultaneity in physics, he is deluded into regarding Parsonian theory as an advanced stage of science. The most fruitful move is to take interaction to be fundamental and then to introduce actors as participants in interaction. At present it is less abstract and better to talk about what humans think, feel, and do.

We must endow humans with the ability both to act and to respond to the actions of others, and also to give interpretive meaning to the actions of others and to their own thoughts, emotions, and actions. To avoid the inadequacy of action theory we need not embrace a behaviorist interpretation of human social interaction. To explain what I attribute to humans, I need to distinguish my own views from standard symbolic interactionism. Socialization is not necessary for an individual to have ability to construct his own reality. Every normal human has ability, at least from the time of birth, to be a full participant in interaction with other humans. This ability is enhanced in the process of interaction. With the acquisition of language a new dimension is added th the child's interpretive skills. But this does not mean that he was unable to have experiences, to know that he had them, and to endow them with meaning. In recent decades it has become clear that a strictly behaviorist account of how one learns a language is woefully inadequate. When one considers the creativity of people in generating new language forms, it seems reasonable to expect that people are able to create new rules of langaugae as well. Does a child, in addition to learning the rules of an established language, have to construct, in whatever primitive fashion, his own rules for entrance into the language? It is true that teaching a child a language is the primary means used by others to construct reality for him. Every small child, well before acquiring even the rudimentary features of a language, can and does construct reality for himself. This is not to imply the possibility of a private language, but to indicate the probability of interpretive meaning given to the actions of others and to one's own states, independently of any standard language.

The disjuncture between one's construction of reality and the construction of reality for one by others is not only an inevitable feature of human social life, but also the interaction of these constructions is fundamental to process laws accounting for process laws in human social life. The image of man, as presented here, and the suggestions on social processes are not an adequate foundation on which to build a comprehensive image of society.

Three things should now be clear. 1) Contemporary pseudo-structuralists understand that consideration of the nature of human social interaction is not an escape from meaningful social analysis. 2) Symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists should understand the sense in which all scientific inquiry is objective and the primacy of interaction over action. 3) Students of human social life who work with traditional discussions of human social interaction should find an integrating factor here. I believe that sociology is theoretically impoverished. These ideas are intended to be evocative. If they are evocative, there has to be an interaction among these constructions in the process of advancing knowledge of human social life.