

Present, Past, and Future

Conjugating George Herbert Mead's perspective on time

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ABSTRACT. Time is of utmost importance in the writings of George Herbert Mead, the American pragmatist philosopher and social psychologist. Yet, despite Mead's prominence as the primary source of the symbolic interactionist approach to sociology, most social scientists are unfamiliar with his perspective on temporality. We describe his analysis of the present, the past, and the future – emphasizing that, for Mead, people live in the present, and that their interpretations of the past and the future are shaped by the present. In addition, we consider the implications of his perspective for our understanding of the self, interaction, and society. **KEY WORDS** • agency • determinism • interaction • self • temporality

It was time that stood between George Herbert Mead and his sought-after breakthrough in social psychology – the taken-for-granted time of everyday life and the nascent behavioral sciences of his era, where it was assumed that the past determines the future. Seeking to circumvent what he viewed as naive forms of determinism, he made time a central and explicit issue in his writings. Indeed, for Mead (1938: 64), more than any other social theorist, we inhabit a 'temporal world.'

His own life was characterized by a busy simultaneity. Mead (1863–1931) was a leading pragmatist philosopher, the primary source of the symbolic interactionist perspective in sociology, a political progressive, and a central figure in the Chicago school of sociology. Drawing from the work of his friends and colleagues, William James and John Dewey, all of Mead's lectures and writings are grounded in the power of temporal organization for the creation of social order – especially the partitioning of time into present, past, and future.

Mead's critical assault on traditional notions of time has been quite fruitful in American sociology – especially among scholars, following Mead, who study temporality within the symbolic interactionist paradigm (Maines, 1987).¹ To one degree or another, we are indebted to Mead and his conceptualization of time for studies of 'dying trajectories' (Glaser and Strauss, 1968: 5), the temporalities of consciousness (Denzin, 1982) and culture (Maines, 1989), the experiences of chronic illness (Maines, 1983; Charmaz, 1991) and widowhood (Lopata, 1986), the career and family plans of young adults (Maines and Hardesty, 1987), pauses in social rhythms (Snow and Brissett, 1986), the experience of work in restaurant kitchens (Fine, 1990), temporal aspects of deviance (Reese and Katovich, 1989), and the nature of social pasts (Katovich and Couch, 1992).

More recently, Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 968) have argued that 'it is the work of George Herbert Mead that offers us the most compelling tools for overcoming inadequate conceptions of agency.' Their sophisticated analysis of agency is rooted in what they (1998: 968) describe as Mead's 'seminal (but little discussed) theorization of temporality.' In a more empirical vein, Flaherty (1999) has used Mead's writings as part of the foundation for his study of variation in the perceived passage of time. Flaherty's analysis of lived duration turns on the fact that self-consciousness is maximized when one confronts problematic circumstances – an observation that is derived from Mead's writings.

The reach of Mead's influence extends to Europe, as well, where Joas (1980/1997) has made significant contributions to the exegetical analysis of his thought. In particular, Joas (1980/1997: 190) devotes a chapter to Mead's perspective on temporality, arguing that he was constructing 'an intersubjectivist theory of the constitution of time-consciousness.' According to Adam (1995: 78), Mead 'presents the most radical of all social science conceptualizations of time,' yet she also points out (1990: 10, 24) that his writings have shaped the work of both Giddens and Luhmann. Clearly, Mead's thought continues to provide inspiration for both empirical research and theoretical development.

Despite the size and scope of this literature, it is safe to say that most social scientists are unfamiliar with the full extent of Mead's perspective on temporality, in part owing to its complexity and counterintuitive qualities (Adam, 1990: 37–8). Moreover, it may be that the centrality of time in Mead's thought is not well known because he has little to say about temporality in his best-known book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Mead, 1934).² Whatever the case, we concur with Joas's (1980/1997: 167) assessment: 'Mead's philosophy of time is certainly the least intelligible and least well elucidated part of his work.' This, despite the importance of time in Mead's thought.

Mead's perspective on temporality has been the primary subject of few articles and no books. Two articles – one by Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich

(1983) and the other by Bielby and Kully (1989) – emphasize Mead's theory of the past, while another by Strauss (1991) concerns Mead's multiple conceptions of evolution.³ This literature is not only small, but does not come to grips with central features of Mead's perspective on time.

We contend that the present is paramount in Mead's analysis of temporality, and our goal is to clarify his writings on this subject. In this article, we examine his thoughts on time by parsing his perspective on the present, the past, and the future. In addition, we consider the implications of his perspective for our understanding of the self, interaction, and society.

The Present

A central strand of our argument is reflected in the organization of this article. If asked to order temporal concepts, most people would feel that it is only natural to list them as past, present, and future. After all, they might say, the past precedes the present, and the present precedes the future. However, this is not in keeping with Mead's priorities.

In formulating his theory, Mead was reacting to the behaviorism of J. B. Watson (1924/1998).⁴ Claiming 'that "consciousness" is neither a definable nor a usable concept,' Watson (1924/1998: 3, 6) asked, 'Why don't we make what we can *observe* the real field of psychology?' It is for this reason that Mead (1934: 2–3) begins his lectures in *Mind, Self, and Society* with the comment, 'John B. Watson's attitude was that of the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* – "Off with their heads!"' Watson (1924/1998: 6) believed that only one question is relevant: 'Can I describe this bit of behavior I see in terms of "stimulus and response"?' As Watson (p. 26) noted, Pavlov had rung a bell and a dog had salivated (despite the absence of food). The cause precedes the effect in time; this is the temporality of behaviorism and the stimulus–response sequence. Mead viewed it as an ill-conceived form of determinism that left no room for essential features of human experience: consciousness, choice, emergence, and novelty.

Mead recognized that Watson and other behaviorists had overlooked a crucial facet of social interaction. Human beings do not respond immediately and unthinkingly to a stimulus in the manner of Pavlov's dog. Rather, a moment exists that Mead (1938: 220) called the 'specious present,' during which the individual interprets the situation and considers various responses to the gestures or utterances of another person.⁵ Instead of a stimulus–response (S–R) sequence, Mead argued in favor of a stimulus–interpretation–response (S–I–R) sequence, and he stressed that the response 'is something that is more or less uncertain' (1934: 176). Thus, '[d]elayed reaction is necessary to intelligent conduct' because it 'makes possible the exercise of intelligent and reflective choice in the

acceptance of that one among these possible alternative responses which is to be carried into overt effect' (pp. 98–9). This formulation enabled Mead to include consciousness, choice, emergence, and novelty in his theoretical framework. Nonetheless, given that the individual interprets the situation with an awareness of social expectations, Mead (1932: 47) observed that the 'social nature of the present arises out of its emergence.'

Mead's (1932) lectures on the subject of time are entitled *The Philosophy of the Present*, and the first heading on the first page is 'The Present as the Locus of Reality.' But when is the present? It is said that baseball pitcher Tom Seaver once asked his manager, Yogi Berra, 'What time is it?' Yogi replied with his own question: 'You mean now?' In fact, the present is becoming the past as you read these words. Just as quicksilver squirts out from under one's finger, so too does the present become utterly elusive when one tries to pin it down. There is a certain irony, then, to Mead's (1932: 28) focus on this most fleeting aspect of time and his insistence that reality 'is always in a present.' But this irony reflects his profound insight. For Mead (1932: 1), all being is becoming, and given his unwavering attention to the dynamics of social interaction (i.e. the flow of expressions, gestures, and utterances), 'that which marks a present is its becoming and its disappearing.' And if the present is characterized by emergence, then, in contradiction to the simplistic temporality of behaviorism, the past does not determine the future: 'Its [the present] chief reference is to the emergent event, that is, to the occurrence of something which is more than the processes that have led up to it.'

For Mead, the present is the paramount form of temporality. When he describes the present as the 'locus of reality,' he means that social interaction is happening now; the self is arising from and acting back upon that interaction now; and each individual is interpreting the comportment of other participants now. It is in the present that we can observe things actually happening (as opposed to recalling or anticipating them). According to Cook (1993: 147), Mead assumes 'the continual emergence of novel elements in experience' – an outlook that Cook attributes to the influence of Whitehead. In his own words, Mead (1932: 1) asserts that the 'world is a world of events.' The individual confronts these emergent events in the present. Moreover, in dealing with these events, the individual exercises essential features of human nature: 'Life is a happening; things take place; the novel arises; and our intelligence shows itself in solving problems' (Mead, 1936: 508). Of course, by 'intelligence,' Mead refers to self-conscious thought (i.e. the interplay of mind and self). Here, in one of the most lyrical statements in the social science literature, Mead offers a vision of the present as the temporal arena for the dynamics of human conduct and experience. While so much of our current conceptual apparatus concerns the past or the future, Mead calls our attention to the immediacy and problematic meaning of each expression, gesture, and utterance.

As one would expect given his philosophical background, Mead's perspective on time is not only counterintuitive by way of priorities, but also by way of definitional precision. For most people, the present is an indefinite interval extending from the current moment (i.e. 'now') to the current era (i.e. something like their own lifetime). Mead sharpens our understanding of the present by narrowing our focus to show how each new expression, gesture, and utterance cuts into the future. As Mead (1936: 299) puts it, 'the present is that which is going on,' and this strict definition makes for a horizon of poignancy around all forms of social interaction because 'our experience is always a passing experience.' Hence, our fascination with the ability of photography and cinematography seemingly to slow, stop, or even reverse time. Typically, the horizon of poignancy is only glimpsed obliquely, but the uniquely human obsession with time can be traced to the self-conscious awareness of our own finitude – an unsettling fact that is presaged by the ephemerality of our every gesture, our every encounter, and our every occasion.

For Mead (1932: 28), then, '[d]urations are a continual sliding of presents into each other.' He later elaborates on this statement in his analysis of the way one 'hears' a melody. Mead (1936: 297) points out that 'there would not be a melody if there was a sound at this moment, another at the next, and so on, each taken by itself.' But what is it that turns separate events into an integrated whole? Mead's answer implicates the human capacity for interpretation:

There must be an interpenetration of the different notes in order that there may be a melody, and that is what is characteristic of all our thought. Duration, as such, always involves this interpenetration, not only in the sense that what is taking place extends over into what is coming into existence and anticipates what is coming on, but also that it gives the meaning and value to things. (1936: 297)

Thus, it is self-conscious thought that links memory, perception, and anticipation into a coherent sense of duration.⁶ What is more, the same interpretive process operates in social interaction where the individual confronts a comparable skein of seemingly separate events.

The Past

In place of the billiard-ball causality of behaviorism, Mead offers what, today, we might call a 'fuzzy' determinism (Ragin, 2000). From his standpoint, the past confronts the present with an array of facts, but the effects of these facts are mediated by attention and interpretation, which render their actual impact uncertain. Therefore, 'rigorous thinking does not necessarily imply that conditioning of the present by the past carries with it the complete determinism of the present by the past' (Mead, 1932: 17). This recognition of the interpretation

and construction of an obdurate reality of facts has been labeled 'cautious naturalism' (Gubrium, 1993; Fine, 1997). Mead's fuzzy determinism makes room for the improvisational character of social interaction – a quintessential attribute, but one that is neglected or denied by other students of human nature.

Mead did not view the world as impinging on the person in the same way that Watson did. There is an infinite number of stimuli in any particular setting – a cognitive overload – but the individual selects those that enable him or her to construct a meaningful and useful line of action: 'Man is distinguished by that power of analysis of the field of stimulation which enables him to pick out one stimulus rather than another' (Mead, 1934: 94). And, of course, subsequent to selecting a stimulus, the individual must interpret it, further problematizing the response. These processes make for the constant reinterpretation of the past from the standpoint of the present. On the group level, this process is implicated in the process of collective memory. It is in this sense, as Mead would have it, that the present determines the (perceived) past, rather than the other way around.

At the analytical level of personal history, there is 'the reinterpretation of one's biography' to fit one's current identity (Berger, 1963: 61), as when people who now espouse a particular sexual orientation dismiss previous contradictory experiences as either youthful experimentation or sexual repression. Here, we have a form of revisionism that Strauss (1969: 67) describes as "'reseeing" the past'; in often amusing ways, people 'bring their pasts into line with their presents.' What is more, Strauss (pp. 167–8) points out that the revision of inconvenient facts also operates at the analytical level of collective history: 'Each generation perceives the past in new terms, and rewrites its own history.' In his own words, Mead (1938: 456) provides further evidence for our central argument: 'All history is the interpretation of the present.' Research by Schwartz (1991) and Schudson (1992) demonstrates that there are limits to revisionism, but their work does not unseat Mead's (1932: 2) paradoxical wisdom: 'The pasts that we are involved in are both irrevocable and revocable.'

As in the preceding quotation, Mead (1932: 31) often used plural forms when discussing the tenses of time: 'our pasts are always mental in the same manner in which the futures that lie in our imaginations ahead of us are mental.' The present is empirical, since it is represented by each new gesture and utterance in the sequential flow of interaction, but the past and the future can only be found in memory and anticipation, respectively. With the word 'future,' we refer to the fact that our conduct can move in any one of many different directions, but Mead realized that the possibility of multiple futures is predicated upon the possibility of multiple pasts. Thus, in counterintuitive fashion, he asserted that 'the past . . . is as hypothetical as the future.' If the past determined the future, then the improvisational qualities of human interaction would be impossible. As Mead (p. 31) puts it, 'the novelty of every future demands a novel past.' Intent

on capturing the way we surprise ourselves and others with our behavior, Mead (p. 27) directs our attention to 'the constant appearance of the novel from whose standpoint our experience calls for a reconstruction which includes the past.' From this perspective, the past is a resource, not a cage. Instead of being imprisoned in it, we use it to make sense of the present and imagine the future.

Mead (1934: 116) did not ignore the significance of the central nervous system, but he realized that our sense of time cannot be reduced to physiological processes:

Our past stays with us in terms of those changes which have resulted from our experience and which are in some sense registered there. The peculiar intelligence of the human form lies in this elaborate control gained through the past. The human animal's past is constantly present in the facility with which he acts, but to say that that past is simply located in the central nervous system is not a correct statement. It is true such a mechanism must be present in order that the past may appear in our experience, but this is part of the conditions, not the only condition.

In other words, the central nervous system is a necessary but not sufficient factor. Its crucial contribution lies in the way it provides a foundation for self-consciousness. The upshot is that, in theory, human beings retain and thereby accumulate knowledge from past experience at both the individual and collective levels of analysis. This self-conscious control over one's conduct is the basis for our remarkable intelligence.

Given the relationship between self-consciousness and our sense of time, Mead (1934: 350) reasoned that human beings must enjoy and suffer a much broader range of temporal experience than that of other animals: 'From the point of view of instinctive behavior in the lower animal . . . past and future are not there.' He adds that the same is true of human beings in those (typically rare) instances when they act in an instinctive fashion. In both cases, Mead (1934: 351) argues, the absence of self-conscious thought collapses time into 'an undifferentiated now':

The flow of experience is not differentiated into a past and future over against an immediate now until reflection affects certain parts of the experience with these characters, with the perfection of adjustment on the one hand, and with the shifting control on the other. The biologic individual [human or animal] lives in an undifferentiated now; the social reflective individual takes this up into a flow of experience within which stands a fixed past and a more or less uncertain future.

However, Arluke and Sanders (1996: 42) have suggested that Mead underestimated the self-consciousness of other animals, thereby also underestimating the range of their temporal experience.

Classic sociological analyses predict behavior and attitudes from background factors, such as age, gender, race, and class. But like Watson's behaviorism, this approach privileges the past over the present. As Blumer (1969: 8-9), Mead's

most prominent student, argued so forcefully, Mead saw interaction not as a mere 'setting' or medium for the release of pre-existing forces, but 'as a presentation of gestures and a response to the meaning of those gestures.' What is more, this process not only transpires within the immediacy of a face-to-face encounter, but also plays a formative role in determining the outcome. In short, Mead (1934: 116) stresses that the past only has behavioral (and uncertain) relevance in the present:

If you recognize somebody it must be through the fact that you have seen that individual in the past, and when you see him again there are those tendencies to react as you have in the past, but the individual must be there, or somebody like him, in order that this may take place.

Maines and his colleagues (1983) are correct when they argue that Mead offers us a sociologically significant theory of the past, but Mead (1934: 116) made it clear that, from his perspective, the past is subordinate to the present: 'The past must be found in the present world.'

The Future

The tenses of time are intertwined in Mead's writings, just as they are in human experience. Of necessity, then, we have already addressed some of what he had to say about the future. Mead (1934: 1) called himself a 'social behaviorist,' and, given his emphasis on conduct, he viewed the future as merely 'mental' (1938: 219) and hypothetical.⁷ It represents what *might* happen – a temporal facet of anticipation. In keeping with his fuzzy determinism, Mead (p. 650) contends that the future is no more determined by the present than the present is determined by the past: 'If it were, there would be no means of distinguishing the future from the present.' Consequently, from Mead's (1938: 413–14) perspective, the future is always 'uncertain' because it 'has a character which is novel and could not be predicted in its ultimate peculiarity.'

Mead's (1934: 173) famous distinction between phases of the self in interaction – the 'I' and the 'me' – is based on temporality. He (1934: 175) defines the 'I' as 'the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others,' while 'the "me" is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes.' Put differently, the 'I' represents a selected line of action, and the 'me' represents one's awareness of social expectations. Given that the individual's response is always more or less unpredictable, Mead (1934: 177) associates the 'I' with emergence, novelty, surprise, and becoming: 'That movement into the future is the step, so to speak, of the ego, of the "I."' In contrast, the 'me' involves a look backward at what has transpired along with evaluation of one's response from the standpoint of social expectations. Mead (pp. 176–7) is careful to point out

that this is an analytical distinction: 'to look back and see what we are doing involves getting memory images. So the "I" really appears experientially as a part of a "me."' Nonetheless, his (1934: 174) conceptualization illuminates the dynamics of self-consciousness and social interaction: 'The "I" of this moment is present in the "me" of the next moment.' From Mead's perspective, the self is a constantly flickering alternation between two temporal modalities.

Mead's perspective on the future can only be fully grasped by viewing it against the backdrop of his philosophical and historical context. He was working within the philosophical tradition of pragmatism (James, 1907), where the test of ideas is in their practical consequences. As we have seen, Mead recognized that human beings typically interpret stimuli before choosing a line of response. In other words, our interpretations are akin to working hypotheses, and, as Mead (1932: 26) put it, the future provides 'the necessary test of the formulation of the past in rising events in experience.'⁸ What does this other person want from me? She says things and does things that I must interpret. Is my interpretation correct? Only time (and her response) will tell. Indeed, Mead (1938: 83) saw the scientific method as 'merely the elaboration of the simple processes of everyday inference.'

He spent most of his professional life in the American Midwest during a peaceful and prosperous era. From this vantage point, Mead thought that the trial and error of social interaction, having been formalized in the scientific method, would make possible the continued reform of society. He (1938: 39) anticipated a society, like science, 'eagerly at work reconstructing itself.' In short, Mead was an optimistic man who saw the long-term future as one of progress toward the amelioration of social problems.

The usual image of the future is that of distant and as yet unforeseen circumstances – the stuff of speculation, crystal balls, and psychic hotlines. These phenomena are evidence of our profound interest in knowing the future, but, try as we might, it always seems to surprise us. From Mead's (1936: 295) perspective, novelty is the only certainty: 'there is a constant creation of that which is new.' And, he (1936: 292) asserts, this is no less true in the natural sciences, where, for example, 'the astronomer can figure out all of the eclipses of the sun for a number of centuries ahead.' Mead notes that planets slow, orbits erode, and, as Einstein demonstrated, there is nothing final about the Newtonian 'laws' that serve as the basis for such predictions. Drawing from Bergson, Mead (1936: 292) concludes that, 'like all the rest of the world, we are en route to something which we cannot foresee. We do not know where we are going, but we are on our way.' This nice phrasing is especially apt as a characterization of conversation, where novelty takes the form of a constant cascade of interaction, not in some distant future, but from moment to moment and act to act during the dynamic interplay of gestures, utterances, and their interpretation. For Mead, the future is now, on the cutting edge of the present.

Mead (1938: 650) tells us that ‘the present is less than the future,’ because the former represents what is actually happening, while the latter represents everything that could happen. Moreover, he (1938: 351) distinguishes between two different phases of the future: the hypothetical future and the immediate future. The hypothetical future is defined as ‘that part of the experience in the temporarily extended duration which immediately, but not instantaneously, controls the ongoing process.’ Here again, Mead refers to those moments during which the individual considers alternative responses to the situation at hand (e.g. the preceding gesture or utterance in a conversation). During these moments, there is a world of possibilities, and selection from this set will shape ensuing events in ways that could not have been anticipated beforehand. Under ordinary circumstances, all of this transpires quickly – hence, Mead’s use of the word ‘immediately’ – but he is at pains to point out that the response is not instantaneous, which would rule out any role for interpretation, consideration, and selection. The immediate future (i.e. that which actually happens) is ‘an extension’ of the hypothetical future, and Mead (1938: 351) observes that it is often ‘wrongly conceived’ as an aspect of the ‘instantaneous present.’ Therefore, these terms correspond to alternating phases of the self in action and reflection.

Mead’s (1936: 301) perspective is never more paradoxical or revealing than when he argues that ‘what is going to happen can actually affect what has just happened.’ On the face of it, his statement would seem to contradict the usual logic of causal determinism, and, indeed, that is his point: ‘The future can influence the present just as it does in our own conduct’ (p. 301). Like a chess player who chooses a move *now* because he or she anticipates a certain response one or more moves into the future, Mead (1936: 318) describes the actor envisioning a path of action and, in so doing, constructing or organizing the sequence of stimulation to which he or she *will have to* respond:

We are at any moment surrounded by an indefinite number of possible sensations. Which of these will be picked out is decided in terms of the response that is already being made. There you have the future, the conclusion of the act, implied in what is now going on but which is not yet achieved, coming in to set up the conditions in terms of which stimuli shall arise.

According to the behaviorists, environmental stimuli precede and thereby determine the conduct of the individual, but Mead (1934: 130) shows us that, where human behavior is at issue, the individual ‘and environment determine each other and are mutually dependent for their existence.’ To the extent that one’s current conduct is oriented toward one’s ability to select a particular path from among future possibilities, the individual is actively and intentionally constructing a line of action, and not passively responding to environmental stimuli. Of unsurpassed importance, then, is Mead’s (1936: 317) contention that this perspective enables us ‘to see conduct as selective, as free.’

Self, Interaction, and Society

Mead's seminal writings still serve as the foundation for the symbolic interactionist paradigm in social psychology. Although his sophisticated and counterintuitive understanding of temporality transforms the way we think about the present, the past, and the future, his unique perspective on time remains a relatively unfamiliar facet of his work. Nonetheless, it has profound implications for the way we conceive of the self, interaction, and society.

Mead shows us that the self is, above all, a temporal process. The distinguishing characteristic of human nature, self-consciousness, represents the awareness of one's own duration and, not incidentally, the inevitability of one's own mortality. 'There is,' says Mead (1932: 13), 'a certain temporal process going on in experience.' As consciousness alternates between action (the 'I') and reflection (the 'me'), a self emerges from the dynamic interplay of present, past, and future. Looking backward at past events, the self has a biographical history, but the 'facts' are subject to (re)interpretation from the standpoint of the present. Looking forward to goals or purposes of one kind or another, the self constructs a line of action in the present by anticipating, and thereby bringing into being, just those events which seem to call for an intended response. Far from being the static and structural entity that is so often depicted, the self is more accurately understood as a momentary stance toward past and future events. Like particles of sand in an hourglass, like the molecular oscillations within quartz crystals, the alternating phases of the self together with the streaming objects of consciousness keep a kind of experiential time. Always and everywhere, one's attention to the internal environment of mind (thoughts, emotions, physical sensations) and the external environment of perception makes for units of lived duration. The primordial clock is self-consciousness.

The intrapersonal temporality of self-consciousness reflects, at least in part, the interpersonal temporality of social interaction. Indeed, we can conceive of each expression, gesture, and utterance, each 'turn' in the conversational sequence, as analogous to that movement marked by the hands of a clock. Like the self, interaction is a temporal process. It is a dynamic and open-ended flow of events. Selective attention and self-conscious choice make for an improvisational, creative, unpredictable, and, as Blumer (1969: 66) puts it, 'formative process' with respect to the subsequent conduct of each participant. Nevertheless, the temporality of social interaction is structured by unwritten rules that ensure an appropriate sequence and the rhythmic dance of turn-taking. During primary socialization, children learn that interpersonal encounters should not last too long or end too quickly. Running parallel to the interactional flow of events is a constant stream of standard temporal units – seconds, minutes, hours, and so forth. With a certain amount of experience (and some coaching from their elders), young children gradually learn how to translate units of inter-

personal conduct into standard temporal units, and vice versa. This capacity for translation enables us to know what it feels like to engage in ten minutes of normal interaction. The upshot is a rough, but crucial, synchronicity in interpersonal relations.

From the painted outlines of hands on the walls of ancient caves to contemporary monuments for fallen heroes, how much of the total human endeavor has been devoted to efforts to transcend the ephemerality of our personal and collective existence? Society is composed of self-conscious individuals, and, just as 'the individual organism determines in some sense its own environment by its sensitivity' (Mead, 1934: 245), so too can society take an interpretive moment during a collectively defined specious present to select one of many possible directions for social development. Consequently, Mead (1934: 251) suggests that, rather than merely reacting to what arises in the future, a self-conscious society is one that can construct a collective line of action: 'The human society that can itself determine what the conditions are within which it lives is no longer in a situation of simply trying to meet the problems that the environment presents.' While Mead (1934: 251) understood that there is no particular direction or 'goal' in evolutionary development, he did see the possibility of social reform in a society that self-consciously selects current moves toward a desired future. And, of course, a society characterized by constant flux and redefinition is one which must ceaselessly reinterpret its past to fit an ever-changing present.

Conclusion

In the eyes of many people (including, sadly, many social scientists), space and time are simply viewed as fundamental facets of nature. Mead's (1982: 117) investigations demolish the naive temporal determinism one finds in everyday life and behaviorism by exploring the previously unmapped temporality of human self-consciousness and social interaction: 'Space and time are thus products of experience.' His work is remarkably fertile, and continues to inspire empirical and theoretical research. Still, most social scientists remain unfamiliar with the full extent of his thoughts on temporality, and the existing literature does not begin to exhaust his potential contributions. Not only does Mead help us to understand the present, the past, and the future, but his insightful analysis also has significant implications for the ways in which we conceptualize the self, interaction, and society.

Like Henri Bergson, Mead (1936: 300) 'insists . . . that we should take time seriously.' One of the more promising ways to do this, in our judgment, is to take Mead seriously. In this regard, unquestionably, there is much more to do. We could not hope to express the full complexity of Mead's perspective on time

in a paper of this length, but we have tried to clarify his challenging writings on this subject, and we will have accomplished our goal if this discussion fans the enduring flame of interest in his work.

Notes

1. Readers who are unfamiliar with this perspective should consult Blumer's (1969) book, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*.
2. Actually, this book was not 'written' by Mead. It represents transcriptions from his lectures in a course entitled Social Psychology. Likewise, *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932) is based on lectures Mead gave at the 1930 meeting of the American Philosophical Association.
3. Readers who are fluent in German will find it useful to examine an article by Bergmann (1981).
4. Miller (1973: 164) also notes that Mead was critical of 'finalism' – 'the view that everything happens either in accordance with a fixed rational plan or according to fixed ends.'
5. Mead's use of the term 'specious present' is derived from the writings of William James (1890: 609). Mead (1938: 219–20) also referred to the 'knife-edge present.'
6. An interesting question, which we cannot answer, is whether Mead was aware of the similar argument by Husserl (1928/1964: 52).
7. However, as previously noted, Mead's social behaviorism is quite different from Watson's version of behaviorism in that Mead was intent on acknowledging the interplay of mind, self, and society.
8. Technically, the test comes on the cutting edge of the present, or what Mead (1938: 351) called the 'hypothetical future,' but since confirmation or disconfirmation has not occurred yet as one initiates a particular line of action, we can think of the temporal context as that which has not quite happened – 'an extension of . . . the immediate future' as Mead (p. 351) would have it.

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