

## GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Most of the important theorists discussed throughout this book achieved their greatest recognition in their lifetimes for their published work. George Herbert Mead, however, was at least as important, at least during his lifetime, for his teaching as for his writing (Huebner, 2014). His words had a powerful impact on many people who were to become important sociologists in the 20th century. As one of his students said, “Conversation was his best medium; writing was a poor second” (T. V. Smith, 1931:369). Let us have another of his students, himself a well-known sociologist—Leonard Cottrell—describe what Mead was like as a teacher:

For me, the course with Professor Mead was a unique and unforgettable experience. . . .

Professor Mead was a large, amiable-looking man who wore a magnificent mustache and a Vandyke beard. He characteristically had a benign, rather shy smile matched with a twinkle in his eyes as if he were enjoying a secret joke he was playing on the audience. . . .

As he lectured—always without notes—Professor Mead would manipulate the piece of chalk and watch it intently. . . . When he made a particularly subtle point in his lecture he would glance up and throw a shy, almost apologetic smile over our heads—never looking directly at anyone. His lecture flowed and we soon learned that questions or comments from the class were not welcome. Indeed, when someone was bold enough to raise a question there was a murmur of disapproval from the students. They objected to any interruption of the golden flow. . . .

His expectations of students were modest. He never gave exams. The main task for each of us students was to write as learned a paper as one could. These Professor Mead read with great care, and what he thought of your paper was your grade in the course. One might suppose that students would read materials for the paper rather than attend his lectures but that was not the case. Students always came. They couldn’t get enough of Mead.

(Cottrell, 1980:49–50)

Mead had enormous difficulty writing, and this troubled him a great deal. “I am vastly depressed by my inability to write what I want to” (cited in G. Cook, 1993:xiii). However, over the years many of Mead’s ideas came to be published, especially in *Mind, Self and Society* (a book based on students’ notes from a course taught by Mead). This book and others of Mead’s works had a powerful influence on the development of contemporary sociology, especially symbolic interactionism.

Born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, on February 27, 1863, Mead was trained mainly in philosophy and its application to social psychology. He received a bachelor’s degree from Oberlin

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