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ABSTRACT

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REFERENCE GROUPS AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: TOWARD AN INTERFACE

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ABSTRACT

An interface between the terms reference group and significant others is established. This is due to the terms having a common root in the classic problem of the self's referral to the other. In the elaboration of this interface a merging of such notions as positive and negative reference groups with two types of significant others becomes possible. A more dynamic conceptualization of the self's referral to others is a direct result of this process.

REFERENCE GROUPS AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS:

TOWARD AN INTERFACE[1]

In recent decades scholars in various disciplines have been interested in a set of problems revolving around the concept of "the self": its development, maintenance, and functions. Much of the pioneering work in this area has been done by the symbolic interactionists and their predecessors. This school of thought comprises, among others, William James, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and such later followers as Herbert Blumer and Manford H. Kuhn. James, Cooley, and Mead laid the basis for the general problem dealt with in this study, that of the self referring to the other, by demonstrating theoretically that the other is a necessary component of an extant self. As Webster (1975:379) aptly notes:

> The interactionist view argues that the self is a consequence, primarily, of other's opinions and actions. The individual learns who he is and how good he is by observing the way others treat him and what they say. This means that self-concept is very much dependent on a social comparison process. The individual compares himself to other individuals or to objective standards and formulates a tentative hypothesis regarding his own level of abilities [or attitudes, feelings, thoughts, et al.]. Then he compares his opinion with the opinion of others to arrive at a more precise conception of his own abilities [italics mine].

Guided in part by Richard S. Brooks' (1967) ideas that the concepts reference group and significant others are interchangeable, our intention is to demonstrate that, at the very least, an interface exists between the concepts. This is due, in part, to their generic roots in the conceptual notion of "the other." In demonstrating this interface, terminology surrounding both of these ideas can be merged. That is, such notions as positive and negative reference group (Newcomb, 1950; Newcomb, 1958; Merton, 1957), orientational other (Kuhn, 1972) and role specific other (Denzin, 1972) can be merged into a meaningful systematization in order to demonstrate the dynamic role that "the other" plays

in the development, and continued existence, of the self. No attempt will be made to integrate this discussion with such other ideas as role theory. However, one should be aware of the congruence exhibited between the ideas set forth in this study and those surrounding role theory. [for a more detailed discussion on this point see: Newcomb, 1950; Merton, 1957; Smith, 1968; Borgatta, 1969; Levinson, 1969; and, Soloman, 1969].

Significant Others: History and Development of the Concept

Eighty years ago, when the major writings of William James first appeared, American social psychologists began to adopt the notion that the individual's self-image is social in origin.

> . . . the social self is, in James' terms, the recognition which one receives from his mates. The person's image of self, in other words, is taken over from the images of himself which others present to him, as indicated by their reaction of approval or disapproval. The individual learns to follow models of conduct which are suggested to him by others . . . (Coser and Rosenberg, 1969:271)

Cooley (1956:184), in a much more literary fashion, made observations similar to James' regarding his conception of the "looking-glass self": "Each to each a looking-glass/ Reflect the other that doth pass." However, these early conceptualizations of the social or looking-glass self, when more closely examined, are found to be wanting. The self is too malleable and not firmly anchored in any developing pattern. It arises out of simplistic patterns of comparison. As Deutsch and Krauss (1965:183) point out:

> What is lacking in both James' and Cooley's theories of the self is a detailed and systematic description of the process whereby the self develops as part of the maturational sequence of the organism. For this we are indebted to George Herbert Mead.

George Herbert Mead "modified and extended the ideas of Cooley" (Webster and Sobieszek, 1974:9) to encompass the notion of the developmental self. What is interesting about this improvement in the ideas of James and Cooley is that

the latter did not even "realize the implications of his own concept [the looking-glass self] . . . until Mead offered his analysis" (Faris, 1970:96).

Mead's Notion of Self

For Mead (1934:135) the idea of the self can best be summarized in the following:

> The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is [it] develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. [See also, Mead, 1964:42; and, Miller, 1973:46-47.]

The ability of the self to develop in the context of a given set of social relations is based on its 'reflexive nature.' That is, the self can be both subject and object to itself; it can reflect upon itself, or, as it is often put, it can be self conscious (Davis, 1949; Deutsch and Krauss, 1965). Mead (1938:445) sees the most fundamental character of the self in its ability to be an object to itself.

> [The self] takes the attitudes of indicating to itself things, persons, and their meanings. This attitude is attained by the individual assuming the role of another, or others, where the attitude is identical. It grows out of the more primitive attitude of indicating to others, and later arousing in the organism the response of the other, because this response is native to the organism so that the stimulation which calls it out in another tends to call it out in the individual himself . . . [italics mine]

Ostensibly, Mead's notion, not unlike those of Cooley and James, is that the person can view himself only from the standpoint of another, the only means for doing so is by taking the role of the other.

> Taking the role of the other is equivalent to being aware of the response one's gesture will evoke in the other, which means that one's implicit response is functionally identical with the response that the gesture evokes in the other (Miller, 1973:48).

To be able to step outside oneself, that is, to take the role of the other, is not possible for the infant. In fact, in suggesting some general steps in

learning to take others' roles, Mead was explicating the developmental notion of the self (Strauss, 1964). To be sure, the development of the self is noteworthy (not simply because it is here that he parts company with James and Cooley) since out of a two stage scheme he posits the conceptual idea of the generalized other.

In play, the first stage posited by Mead (1938:374), the reflexive nature of the self has not yet developed. That is, the ability to completely take the role of the other has not yet been established.

> The child in one role addresses himself naively in another role. These roles are not at first organized into a personality, the child simply passing from the one into the other as the conduct in one calls out a response in the other. In more consecutive play, especially of two or more children, the tendency to take other parts comes in to stimulate and control the execution of the part assumed. Thus the child will stop and applaud himself and then resume his performance. If the play becomes a consecutive whole, the tendency to take all the parts at the appropriate moments is present in the attitude of the individual child, controlling his entire conduct . . . .

The child, then, as he takes the role of the other in his play, learns to regard himself from an external point of view. He is, in a sense, organizing particular attitudes held by others toward himself in the context of the social acts he has explored in his play (Deutsch and Krauss, 1965; Davis, 1949). As Mead notes, this fundamental organization of attitudes necessarily precedes the second stage (in the development of the self), that of the game, in that in the game situation, the child must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in the game. The different roles assumed in this situation must, of necessity, have a definite relationship to each other.

> The nature of the game is such that every act in the game is determined and qualified by all the other acts. This is expressed by the rules of the game, and implies in each individual a <u>generalized player</u> that is present in every part taken. What takes place in this dramatic fashion in children's plays and games evidently goes on in the formation of the child's personality in the life of the family, and of other groups in which the child finds himself.

> Through assuming the roles of others, to which he has stimulated himself by his own conduct, he is organizing them into generalized attitudes and becomes a member of the family, of the school, of his set (Mead, 1938:374-75; Mead, 1934:151 passim) [italics mine].

To this point we have shown, using ideas from various of Mead's essays, that the self is social in origin, that through its ability to be both subject and object to itself, it can take the role of the other, and lastly, and most importantly for our purposes, as the self develops in a sequential fashion, an organization of attitudes with reference to others takes place. This is what Mead is alluding to when he mentions a "generalized player" in regard to the game situation.

The Generalized Other

Mead's notion of the "generalized player," or better known parallel term, the "generalized other," stands at the forefront of the entire conceptual scheme employed in this study. We have carefully led the reader through the basic steps that Mead outlines before the introduction of this, his most oft employed term. We feel the ideas behind the conception are important in that they are integrally linked to two terms to be introduced at a later point: significant others and reference group. In demonstrating this linkage, we will establish a groundwork which will allow us to show that an interface exists between these terms.

The generalized other is simply the "organized community or social group which gives the individual his unity of self . . . . The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community" (Mead, 1934:154). For Mead, the importance of the generalized other lies in its capacity for allowing the self to develop to its fullest. That is, the self, in the most complete sense, does not simply take the attitudes of the generalized other toward himself and others, it also must take these attitudes toward the various

social activities and situations in which the self engages in a day-to-day basis. As Mead (1934:155) points out, regarding this most heightened development of self,

> Only insofar as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed.

Further, Mead (1934:155) sees complex society as possible only when the individual can take the general attitudes of others and direct his behavior accordingly. In this way, the community, or for that matter any social group, exercises some sort of control or influence over the individual.

> It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. In abstract thought the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, without reference to its expression in any particular other individual; and in concrete thought he takes that attitude insofar as it is expressed in the attitudes toward his behavior of those other individuals with whom he is involved in the given social situation or act.

The generalized other, then, is an abstract notion of the other--society's representative in the individual. This construct embodies the norms, values, and ideals that the self refers to in its abstract thought. The other, or what we shall herein term the categoric other, is the face-to-face concrete representative of some larger group, which the self refers to for its norms, values, and actions in a given social situation. Two of Mead's ideas are of crucial import here: the notion of the social origins of the self; and, the notion of control or influence mediated by the generalized or categoric other. That is, since the self arises within the context of social interaction, which the categoric or generalized other is of necessity a party to, and control of the individual must stem in part from the sanctions of the other ["the need for approval" cf. Davis,

1949], the self must accept a minimal number of attitudes, opinions, etc., so as to allow itself the capacity for existence. For it is that the self cannot exist apart from others. Therefore, in rejecting others' influence on the self, its very basis would be destroyed (Miller, 1973). Stated another way, the attitudes and opinions of others are important for the development and continued existence of the self. As Strauss (1959:35) succinctly puts it:

> Validation and denial of validation by important other persons leads inevitably to reinterpretations of one's activity [italics mine].

But, who are these so-called important other persons that are necessary for the existence of the self? Mead spoke mainly of the generalized other, and in face-to-face situations, the categoric other. However, he did not give any clues as to which, or how many, individuals are to actually form the basis of these conceptualizations.

> . . . it is not possible to be certain exactly how Mead conceptualized the generalized other--whether it is a weighted averaging of the attitudes of all the others with whom the individual interacts, or whether it requires a unanimous community opinion on the specific issue (Webster and Sobieszek, 1974:11).

As some point out, Davis (1949) among them, there must be some selection of others whose opinions count most but, as noted above, Mead gave us no clues. Hence, we turn now to one of Mead's contemporaries who built upon his early work. In so doing, he helped to identify, more specifically, the others referred to by the self.

Significant Others[2]

Harry Stack Sullivan is probably best known for his ideas on the fusion of psychiatry with the social sciences. In point of fact, a series of his essays appears under just such a heading (Sullivan, 1964). However, we are most concerned with his elaboration and conceptual clarification of Mead's notion of the generalized other.

Sullivan, being quite concerned with the development and socialization of the infant and child, closely examined the relationships formed with others during this period in the life cycle. Naturally, this early period of life is one in which the child is expc ed mainly to the influence of the parents, which Sullivan (1964:67) first termed "relevant others." In a series of later essays (Sullivan, 1953:16 ff.) he amended relevant others to read the "significant adult" or "significant other." What is important here is that the relationship between the significant other and the child is crucial for the remainder of the child's life. In fact, his entire conception of self rests upon the reflected appraisals of his significant others. As Sullivan (1953:20) points out:

> As one proceeds into childhood, disapproval, dissatisfaction with one's performances becomes more and more the tool of the significant adult in educating the infant in the folk ways, the tradition, the culture in which he is expected to live . . . . Gradually [the child] comes to perceive disapproving expressions of the mother, let us say; gradually he comes to understand disapproving statements.

Hence as the child develops, he refers to the significant other for approval or disapproval of his actions. For Sullivan, like Mead, the self arises out of this social process. However, Sullivan has restricted this process of referring to the other to the child's parents or others who are in charge of his early care. Clearly, this delimits Mead's notion of the generalized other to a select few who count most for the child.

> The facilitations and deprivations by the parents and significant others are the source of the material which is built into the self dynamism. Out of all that happens to the infant and child, only this 'marked' experience is incorporated into the self . . . . (Sullivan, 1953:21)

Because Sullivan places so much closure on who the other is (i.e., parents and those responsible for the early care of the child) he has moved away from explicating Mead's notion of the generalized other. Yet, his movement toward the categoric other (i.e., the other in the face-to-face situation) does not totally void the possibility of a link between the significant other and the

generalized other. That is, the 'marked' experience fostered by the individual's significant other(s), which is incorporated into the self, implies not only a past history, but also points to the possibilities of an abstract association with these others. Viewed in this manner, Sullivan's significant other has some ties to Mead's generalized other.

Basically then, Sullivan sees the significant other as providing the fundamental basis of the individual's self-concept. However, another problem arises in that the restrictions placed on the term neglect the influence of others outside of those responsible for the individual's early care. That is, those others who effect one's self-concept in his later life are not taken into account. Recent studies, such as Berger and Luckman, 1966; Brim and Wheeler, 1966; and Clausen, 1968, have focused on this problem employing somewhat different terminology. They see the early life influence of others as primary socialization, and that of later life, secondary socialization. While we do not dispute either their ideas or terms, we note that there are others who operate in the same conceptual and terminological framework as ourselves. Hence, we turn to them for further elaboration on the notion of significant others.

Orientational Others

The late Manford H. Kuhn is responsible, at least in part, for the continued development and refinement of the conceptualizations surrounding the notion of the self's referral to the other.[3] Basically, Kuhn recognizes that Mead, and others, have shown the other to be crucial in the development of the self. As the reader is quite aware, we have been careful to demonstrate this. However, Kuhn (1972:172) takes issue with how Mead treats the other, in that the other "is never attended to with the discerning and analytic interest which [he] give[s] the actor." In fact, Kuhn asserts that for Mead, as well as others in his tradition such as Cooley and Dewey, the other "is primarily a fact of the mind" (Kuhn, 1972:173).

Kuhn's indictment of how the other has been viewed does not stop with his criticism of Mead, Cooley and Dewey. It continues to Harry Stack Sullivan and his term, the significant other. According to Kuhn (1972:174), Sullivan, together with Mead, view the other as follows:

> The other turns out to be the other as the actor sees him. But the actor's own view of himself is gained only through the image he imagines the other to have of him. His objects, his reality in short, derive from the same source of shared perspectives with imagined others.

What Kuhn appears to be revelling against is that the tradition, from Mead to Sullivan, places the other in a subservient position to the self. That is, the notion of the other and how it is selected, whether this selection process is regularized, and whether this entire notion can be observed is never attended to (Kuhn, 1972). However, in operationalizing the conceptual notion of the other, to a greater degree, this process, if it exists at all, can be documented. Kuhn's nascent term, the orientational other, is the outgrowth of just such a search for a regularized selection process. Kuhn (1972:183) sees the orientational other as referring to:

1) The others to whom the individual is most fully, broadly, and basically committed, emotionally and psychologically;
2) the others who have provided him with his general vocabulary, including his most basic and crucial concepts and categories;
3) the others who have provided and continue to provide him with his categories of self and other and with the meaningful roles to which such assignments refer;
4) the others in communication with whom his self-conception is basically sustained and/or changed.

Kuhn clearly meant this concept to be distinct from Mead's notion of the other and Sullivan's more restrictive significant other. It is felt that Kuhn's operationalization is noteworthy as it stands but is faulty on two fronts in that, at base, it is not clearly distinct from either Mead's or Sullivan's original ideas. With all due respect, we might note that had Kuhn lived to see the publication of his essay, he, too, might have seen these faults.

First, all Kuhn has done is elaborate upon Sullivan's notion of the significant other. That is, in the four points mentioned as comprising an orientational other, all seem to be derived from Sullivan's ideas of the significant adult's influence in the child's life. [Recall the fact that the marked experiences with the significant other are all that is incorporated into the self]. There is evidence that Kuhn realized this but because Sullivan's term was so enmeshed with Mead's notion of the other, he opted for a different name.

> I should have preferred to call it by the name of significant other, but since that term has become so solidly entrenched in our usage as meaning something not basically different from simply "the other," in Mead's terms, I will suggest the rather less desirable name "orientational other" (Kuhn, 1972:182)

Nonetheless, the notion of the orientational other is not distinctly different from Sullivan's significant other. In his quest to choose a proper name for his term, Kuhn failed to see the similarity between concepts.

The second fault lies in Kuhn's seemingly interchangeable use of the categoric other with the generalized other. Because of this, we are never sure which 'other' the orientational other is supposed to be. It would appear, in merging the ideas of Kuhn, Sullivan, and Mead, that the orientational other can be marginally linked to the generalized other and at the same time, intimately linked to the categoric other. That is, since Kuhn's orientational other is similar to Sullivan's notion of the significant other, there exists the possibility of the orientational other being an abstraction to which the self refers.[4] Hence, its marginal link to Mead's generalized other. Yet, because the orientational other, in the same way as Sullivan's significant other, points directly to parents, or those responsible for the child's early care, the term more appropriately is an extension of the categoric other.

From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that both significant others and orientational others are, due to their specificity (i.e., parents or those

persons to whom the individual is most basically committed), elaborations of the categoric other. Because both imply the possibilities of an abstract notion of the other, the inference can be drawn that a link, albeit a weak one, exists between the two terms and the generalized other. It becomes necessary then to introduce a final term which has no connection whatsoever to the generalized other.

Role Specific Others

Denzin (1972), in one of the few attempts explicitly directed toward the problem of the categoric other, introduced the notion of the role specific other; defined as: ". . . those others who are significant for individuals in a highly role-specific sense . . . (Denzin, 1972:186). In conceptualizing role specific others, Denzin implies that Sullivan's conception of significant others, as well as Mead's conception of the other (neither categoric nor generalized other specified) are both enmeshed in his notion of the role specific other (cf. Denzin, 1972:186).[5]

Merging Denzin's role specific other with the others of Mead, Sullivan and Kuhn allows us to conceptualize the self's referral to the other in a more dynamic way. Schematically [see Figure 1], Mead's generalized other is an abstract conception of the other wich implies a past, present and future involvement with untold numbers of others. Mead's other, or what we have herein termed the categoric other, serves as the opposite of the generalized other in that it implies the other that the self is presently involved with in a face-to-face situation.

Following directly from the above, we note that because Sullivan places so much closure on who the other is (i.e., significant others refer to parents or those responsible for the early care of the child), he is further elaborating

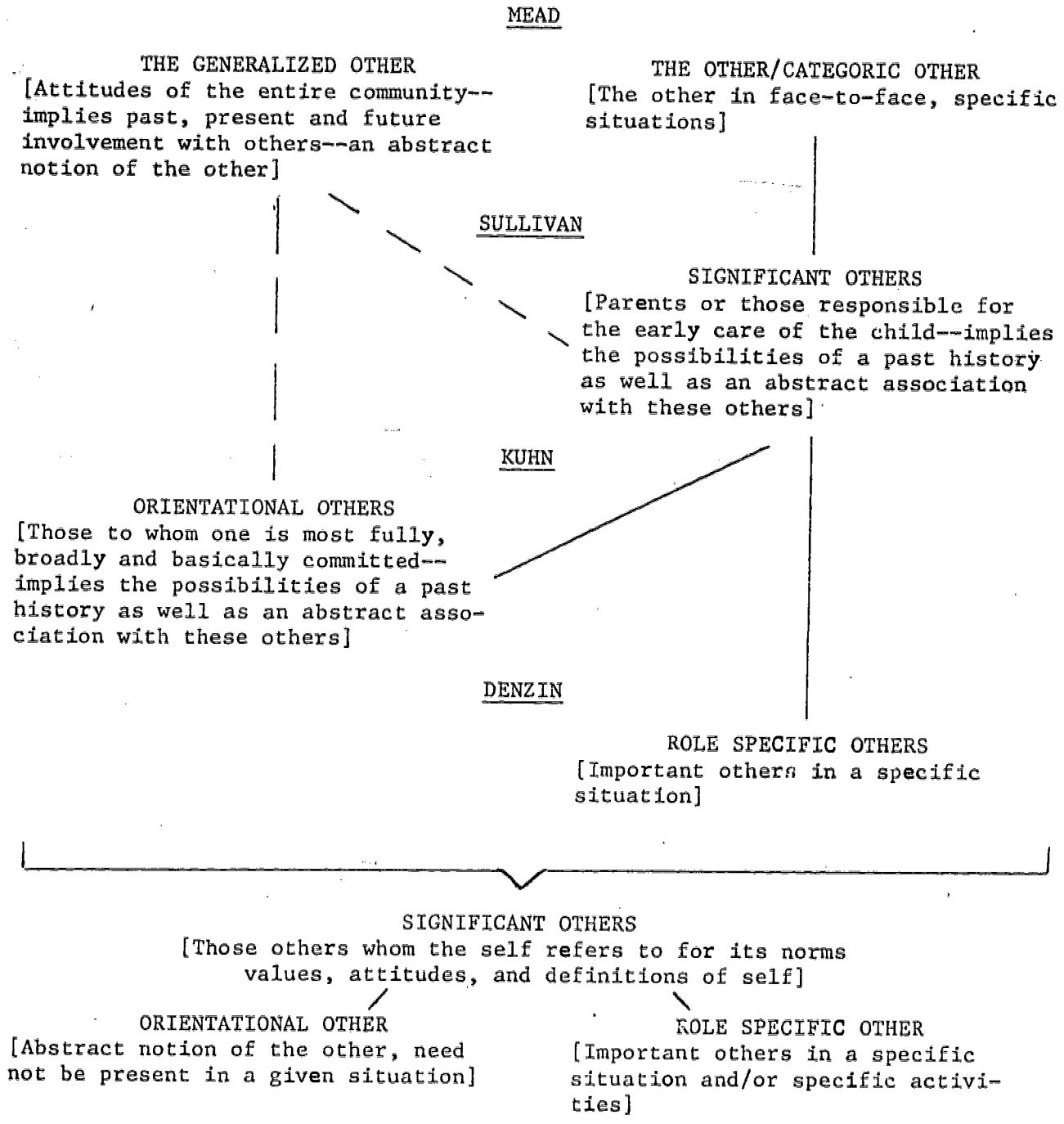

Figure 1. A Schema for the Development of the Concept Significant Others

the notion of the categoric other. Yet, since he speaks of a 'marked' life experience being incorporated into the self, he implies the possibility of a past involvement with, as well as an abstract association to, the individual's significant others. These possibilities, then, serve as the link between his significant other and Mead's generalized other.

Kuhn's orientational other, in the same way as Sullivan's significant other, alludes to parents or those responsible for the early care of the child (i.e., orientational others refer to those others to whom the individual is most fully, broadly and basically committed). Because Kuhn's term seemingly points to parents, it serves as another elaboration of the categoric other. However, the orientational other, because it seems to imply a past history with, and abstract association to, these others can also be linked to the generalized other. The orientational other, then, is clearly in opposition to Denzin's role specific other (i.e., the other referred to in a specific situation). Accordingly, these two types of others (orientational and role specific) can serve as ideal-typical bifurcations of a general category of others to whom the self refers: significant others.

For our purposes, then, significant others are those others to whom the individual refers for his norms, values, attitudes and definitions of self. This general category can then be dichotomized to yield: orientational others, an abstract notion of others, they need not be present in a given situation; and, role specific others, important others in a specific situation and/or activity. It is in this manner that one step can be taken toward a more dynamic conceptualization of the self's referral to the other.

Reference Groups: A Brief History and Development of the Concept

Many scholars have noted, Kuhn (1970) and Shibutani (1972) among them, that the concept of reference group is wrought with unclear meaning and usage.

Nevertheless the concept has continued to be utilized in a menagerie of studies (cf. Schmitt, 1972:10) seemingly without regard for this pointed lack of clarity. Our intent, then, is to clarify the concept by tracing its patchwork meaning and development since its inception in the early 1950's to the present.

Herbert H. Hyman is commonly given credit for the first operationalization of the reference group concept.[6] In his 1942 study, The Psychology of Status, the concept is seen as a way of getting at an individual's subjective social status. That is, the concept is employed in ascertaining to whom the individual compared himself regarding his social status (Hyman, 1942:15).[7] What is of import here is that in his conceptualization of reference groups, Hyman failed to specify how and in what manner the concept was to be used. It is quite apparent that Hyman understands the basic function of reference groups to be for the purpose of comparison. That is, the individual compares himself to others in order to arrive at a greater awareness of where he stands relative to these others. However, as it is stated, this basic function is too nebulous. Simply put, the concept lacks clear meaning which, sooner or later, will destroy any useful interpretation of it. As Sherif (1969:84) notes, "there are incipient signs of its becoming a magic term to explain anything and everything concerning group relations."

In an effort toward simplification and clarification of the reference group concept, three issues are crucial: (1) Are reference groups to be distinguished from membership groups? (2) Must reference groups serve only a comparison function? and, (3) Can an individual be negatively as well as positively oriented to a reference group?

Reference Groups and Membership Groups

It seems that Hyman (1942), in dealing with the concept of subjective social status, found great variability in the groups to which the subjects of

his study oriented themselves. In many cases the subjects oriented themselves to groups in which they were not members. Deutsch and Krauss (1965:191) point out that this led Hyman

> . . . to distinguish between a "membership group" (the group to which someone actually belongs) and a "reference group" (the group which someone employs as a basis of comparison for self- appraisal). In some cases, the reference group is a nonmembership group; in other cases it is not.

If one accepts this distinction, it would appear that the self can orient itself to both membership groups and reference groups. In some cases, these two groups will be the same. Others, however, have interpreted Hyman's distinction in a somewhat different manner. According to Kuhn (1972:175), Hyman's conception of reference group

> . . . assumes that people make fundamental judgments and self-assessments based on psychological identifications rather than on formal memberships in groups [italics mine].

Obviously, the two interpretations are different. While one maintains a distinction between the reference group and membership group, the other dismisses all membership considerations. Whether either one is "correct" remains a question for systematic empirical investigation above and beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, it would appear that Kuhn's interpretation, based on the following ideas, aids in the overall conceptual clarification sought.

According to Newcomb (1950:227):

> All membership groups probably serve as reference groups for their members to some degree and in some ways. But not all reference groups are membership groups, most of us are influenced by the norms of some groups in which we are not recognized by others as belonging.

A direct conclusion would seem to be that to force a distinction between reference group and membership group introduces extraneous material since the information sought is to which group, or groups, the individual orients himself. Whether an individual holds actual membership in a group would seem to be of

little consequence; what is important is the orientation he espouses. This conclusion tends to be confirmed in a broad spectrum of the literature on reference groups, in that many state that if the individual's reference groups can be identified very good predictions about his probable attitudes and behaviors can be made (cf. Shibutani, 1961; Sherif and Sherif, 1964; Sherif and Sherif, 1969; Sherif, 1969; and Webster, 1975). Clearly there is no distinction made regarding membership considerations.

Merton and Kitt (1950), dealing with studies of U.S. servicemen in World War II, find that in many instances men orient themselves to groups in which they are not members. Terming this orientation to groups other than their own (or nonmembership groups), "anticipatory socialization," they explain that the phenomenon is a function of the men's aspirations to become a member of the group (Merton and Kitt, 1950:87-95). Nevertheless, this documented orientation to nonmembership as well as membership groups can be viewed as further evidence that an individual's reference groups are based on an identification to, rather than membership in, them.

Still more evidence for simply focusing on the relatedness of the individual to the group, without regard for membership status, is seen in the Sherifs' work (1964; 1969). Their conceptualization of the reference group is simply that group, "with which the individual identifies or aspires to belong" (Sherif and Sherif, 1964:54-55).[8] Even in the most recent research, the idea of a conceptual distinction between reference groups being either membership or nonmembership is alluded to as being superfluous. As Webster (1975:127) notes:

> Reference groups need not be membership groups (and vice versa)--that is a fundamental principle in using the concept reference group. A person may become a member of a group and not care at all what the other members think of his behavior or his attitudes . . . . More frequently we see cases where individuals orient themselves to groups of which they are not members.

It would seem then, that to make a distinction as to whether an individual's reference groups are of a membership or nonmembership nature provides one with little information over and above that gained by simply ascertaining to which group he refers himself. Further, to focus only upon the individual's identification to groups aids in the clarification of what a reference group is, in that the reference group concept becomes a means to assess the self's referral to others in society regardless of whether the individual is in actuality a member of a group to which these others belong.

Functions of Reference Groups

In explicating the previous section, all complications concerning the functions that reference groups serve were excluded. As noted, Hyman (1942) sees that reference groups serve a comparison function for the individual. They allow the individual to compare himself to others so as to have a better understanding of himself. However, others have been inclined to feel that reference groups can serve not only as points of comparison but also as control mechanisms for the individual. That is, they can foster a set of norms or behavioral prescriptions for the individual. There are those who feel these two functions exist independently of one another. The notion herein espoused is that these functions exist simultaneously within the context of any given reference group. In demonstrating this, further simplification of the reference group concept will be gained.

According to Kelley (1968:78-79), in his classic study on the function of the reference groups, there are two kinds of relationships between the individual and the group.[9]

> The first usage has been to denote a group in which the inddividual is motivated to gain or maintain acceptance. To promote this acceptance, he holds his attitudes in conformity with what he perceives to be the consensus of opinion among the group members . . . . The second usage

of "reference group" has been to denote a group which the person uses as a reference point in making evaluations of himself and others.

The former usage is termed the normative and the latter, the comparative function of reference groups. As they are defined, however, it would seem that these functions, of necessity, should occur together.[10] When the individual employs a group as a checkpoint (i.e., the comparative function) in making evaluations of himself or others, his judgment must rest on some normative perspective held in concert with others. The converse follows, then, that when the individual utilizes a group for certain attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors (i.e., the normative function) he must make a comparison between what he perceives to be the group norm and his own norms, or between the norms of his own group and those of other groups.

An example of the normative and comparative functions existing simultaneously can be seen in the following. X is a graduate student. X is said to be a "good" graduate student by others whose opinions on the subject of "good" versus "bad" graduate students Y accepts. Y accepts these opinions of others because these others are important to him. They are his reference group, at least in the matter of who is a "good" graduate student. Yet, because Y needs to know where he stands on the continuum of good to bad as a graduate student, he compares himself to X and formulates a final opinion of not only X, but of himself, too. Because his reference group holds that X is a good graduate student, Y will probably surmise the same; in doing so, he will compare himself to X based upon the normative criteria that he understands his reference group takes into account in deciding whether X is a "good" graduate student. Hence, the normative functions served by his reference group helped him to formulate his opinions toward X as a "good" graduate student and the comparative function, operating simultaneously, allowed him to come to a greater understanding of where he stands relative to other graduate students and to X in particular.

In seeking answers to the first two questions, we have arrived at a more simplified conception of what a reference group is and what function it serves. In the last issue discussed, concerning the ability of an individual to orient himself to his reference group(s) in either a positive or negative manner, no such simplification will be made. Simply put, it is felt that this distinction is crucial in that it allows one to assess, to a greater degree, the situational nature of the individual's relation to the group.

Negative and Positive Reference Groups

In his research at Bennington College, Newcomb (1943) finds that while some individuals adopt the more accepted attitudes of the general college community, others, while fully aware that these opinions exist, hold attitudes largely divergent from the community at large. The tentative answers that Newcomb (1943:161) formulates point to certain aspects of personality or "personality variables" as somehow influencing "conformity with the mores" of the college community. Clearly, Newcomb seems puzzled as to why the differences in attitude should be so marked by individuals who had all experienced the same, rather closed, environmental influences of the Bennington community.

In a later work, Newcomb (1950) posits, in connection with the reference group concept, the idea that an individual has the capacity to be either positively or negatively (or both, simultaneously) oriented to his reference group. According to Newcomb (1950:226),

> . . . a positive reference group is one in which a person is motivated to be accepted and treated as a member (overtly or symbolically), whereas a negative reference group is one which he is motivated to oppose, or in which he does not want to be treated as a member.

In short, the possibility of negative and positive reference groups allows one to more fully comprehend the wax and wane present in the individual's relations to the group (cf. Merton, 1957:301). Newcomb (1958), returning to the still

unclear results of the Bennington study, finds that in utilizing the concept of positive and negative reference groups, new light is cast on why some individuals hold one set of opinions while others hold another.

> . . . attitudes, however, are not acquired in a social vacuum. Their acquisition is a function of relating oneself to some group or groups, positively or negatively (Newcomb, 1958:275).

Clearly then, attitude formation, or any other purpose that the reference group might serve, is a function of the way in which the individual relates himself to the group. Coupled with the fact that individuals relate themselves to several groups, this process is, at the very least, complex. Regardless of the complexity, to fully assess the individual's espoused attitudes, norms, and the like, which reference group theorists hypothesize can be done if a person's reference groups are known, information regarding in what manner (either positively or negatively) these groups are held must be obtained.

A Reference Group Schema

Thus far, it has been shown that both the membership and functional considerations surrounding the conceptualization of reference group can be dismissed. On the other hand, the regard in which the reference group is held, either positively or negatively, has been demonstrated to be crucial in comprehending the situational nature of the individual's relation to the group. This overall process of simplification can be shown pictorially. [See Figure 2]

As seen in Figure 2, Hyman fostered an unclear notion of the concept by distinguishing between reference group and membership group. To our way of thinking, a reference group becomes such through an individual's identification with it. Whether the individual is a member of the group or not seems to be a less than noteworthy issue. This same thinking follows in conjunction with Kelley's (1968) distinction between normative and comparative reference groups.

HYMAN

Reference Group

Membership Group ⟷ Nonmembership Group[a]

KELLEY

Normative ⟷ Comparative

NEWCOMB

Positive ≠ Negative[b]

REFERENCE GROUP
[Any group, real or imaginary, whose standpoint is being used as a frame of reference by the actor]

Positive
[Individual is motivated to accept or want to be like]

Negative
[Individual is motivated to oppose or not wish to be like]

[a]The linking symbol implies that the two are inseparable.

[b]The symbol linking the two implies that they are clearly distinct.

Figure 2. A Schema of the Major Developments and Subsequent Simplification of the Concept Reference Group

As seen in Figure 2, Hyman fostered an unclear notion of the concept by distinguishing between reference group and membership group. To our way of thinking, a reference group becomes such through an individual's identification with it. Whether the individual is a member of the group or not seems to be a less than noteworthy issue. This same thinking follows in conjunction with Kelley's (1968) distinction between normative and comparative reference groups. That is, since the functions would most likely occur within the same reference group context, it is useless to make the distinction. This leads to an overall simplification of the entire reference group concept. Shibutani's (1961:257) definition of a reference group reflects a similar simplified derivation.

> The concept of reference group may be used to designate that group, real or imaginary, whose standpoint is being used as a frame of reference by the actor.

While engaged in the simplification of what a reference group is, Shibutani does not ignore the relative importance of the distinct notion of the operation of positive and negative reference groups. In stating that, "There is a selective sensitivity to others, men are not equally responsive to the opinions of everyone . . ." (Shibutani, 1961:257) he implicitly confirms the dynamic underpinnings of the individual's relation to the group. That is, not only can one group be more important than another, but also the group can be held in a positive or negative regard by the individual.

In the simplification of the reference group concept, the seldom explored dimension of orientation to the group has emerged. One might recall that in the simplification of the significant other concept, the end products were likewise characterized in a 'dimensional' (or situational) manner. Accordingly, upon reaching a parallel juncture regarding both reference group and significant other concepts, it is appropriate to consider the interface which is felt to exist between them.

Two Terms, One Concept: The Evidence for Interface

In merging the notions of reference groups and significant others, it becomes quite apparent that both concepts are, in reality, enmeshed in one concept--the notion of the other. This follows directly from the final formulations of each term. Significant others are those others whom the self refers to for its norms, values, attitudes, and definitions of self. And, reference groups are seen as being composed of that group, real or imaginary, whose standpoint is being used as a frame of reference by the actor. The norms, values, attitudes and definitions of self would seem to constitute the standpoint that is used as a frame of reference by the actor. But, a problem arises in that the focus of each definition is on a different entity. The former is seemingly concerned with the individual's relation to other individuals while the latter focuses on the individual's relation to others who constitute a group. This is distinctly different from Brooks' (1967:474-75) interchangeable use of the terms.

> . . . the terms "significant other" and "reference group" [can be] used synonymously. They may be defined as a group or person "with which an individual feels identified and to which he aspires to relate or maintain his identity."

The fact that the two terms point to different entities allows us to discount Brooks' idea that the terms are interchangeable. This leaves the question as to whether an interface, between the terms, exists. The literature suggests that the evidence sought centers in the following three concerns: (1) The empirical clarification that reference group theory brought about in Meadian hypotheses; (2) The direct influence of Mead and others in the symbolic interactionist tradition on reference group theory; and (3) The similarity in character of Hyman's (1942) reference individual and significant others.

Empirical Clarification

An important point, ignored in the discussion of Kuhn's orientational other, is that his concept is a by-product of a greater systematic and empirical

treatment that the entire notion of the other receives in reference group theory. As Kuhn (1972:180) remarks,

> One cannot help acknowledging the debt symbolic interaction theory has to reference group theory, if only in the demonstration that the problem of the other may be approached systematically and empirically.

Others, such as Deutsch and Krauss (1965) and Coser and Rosenberg (1969), confirm Kuhn's statement in that they feel that reference group theory (because it involves systematic empirical testing) is a logical extension of Mead's early work on the notion of the other. The outgrowth of reference group theory can be seen in a more refined understanding, by both schools of thought, of the process of the self referring to others. Realizing that refined conceptualizations of the other, stemming directly from reference group theory, are being utilized by those in the Meadian tradition, it must be assumed that the ideas surrounding the use of the concepts are of a parallel nature. Upon arriving at this conclusion, the first point of the interface is established.

Mead's Influence on Reference Group Theory

As Shibutani (1972) notes, there is actually nothing new in reference group theory. The reason for this is that Mead, and others in the symbolic interactionist tradition, made similar observations concerning the process of the self's referral to others years before the term reference group was coined. Kuhn (1970:76) confirms this influence stating that, "the notion of reference group is obviously closely related to the whole problem of the other as dealt with by Mead and Sullivan . . ." Moreover, Schmitt (1972) in his book, The Reference Other Orientation, has documented, in more detail than anyone else, the pervasive influence of the symbolic interactionists in general, and Mead in particular, upon reference group theory and concepts. A summary of his points follows.

According to Schmitt, many of the underlying assumptions of symbolic interactionism have influenced and anticipated such ideas as normative and comparative reference groups. In this regard he notes,

> It was the emphasis of the early school of symbolic interactionism upon the role of the other in the individual's self-appraisals that foreshadowed the comparative reference group concept . . . [Further] the generalized other, Mead's concept, is a precursor of what Kelley later referred to as a normative reference group (Schmitt, 1972:17-19).

The influence is not simply upon the ideas surrounding the concept, it is on the concept itself.

> Symbolic interactionism both anticipated and directly influenced the development of the reference group concept through its emphasis on the symbolic other (Schmitt, 1972:17).

In serving as the most important forerunner of the reference group concept, it becomes even more apparent that the hypothesized interface can be demonstrated. In point of fact, it would appear that the terms reference group and significant others are, as Brooks (1967) states, synonymous. However, in explicating the last issue concerning the similarity of reference individuals and significant others, it will be shown that this is not the case.

The Reference Individual and the Significant Other

Hyman's original conception of a reference individual follows directly in line with that of the reference group. That is, the reference individual is used for purposes of comparison by the individual. But the question arises as to whether reference individuals and reference groups are one in the same. If Hyman's (1942:23-29) unclear results are followed, we might conclude in the affirmative. However, Merton (1957), since he distinguishes between reference groups, reference individuals, and role models, might be less inclined to agree. At any rate, it is impossible to be sure one way or the other, since "Research and theory have tended to focus on reference groups to the relative neglect of reference individuals" (Merton, 1957:302).

It would seem, adding together much of what has been stated thus far, that a reference individual is, in reality, a significant other. It follows then that since both terms point to individuals rather than to groups that more likely than not, they (significant others or reference individuals) will be part of an individual's larger reference group. Again, this would confirm that the terms reference group and significant other cannot be used interchangeably. Yet, our notion that significant others (or reference individuals) are part and parcel of an individual's reference group can be seen in Webster's (1975:115) conception.

> [A reference group is] a set of significant others with whom the individual may compare his attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Given that significant others are part of a person's reference groups it becomes apparent that an interface between the terms exists [see Figure 3].[11] The very existence of this interface allows us to merge other ideas surrounding the terms. That is, since significant others are part of a reference group, they can be held in both a positive or negative regard. Further, since significant others can be either orientational or role specific, we can conceive of positive and negative orientational others, and positive and negative role specific others. It is in this way that the dimensional or situational nature of the individual's relation to the other can be ascertained.

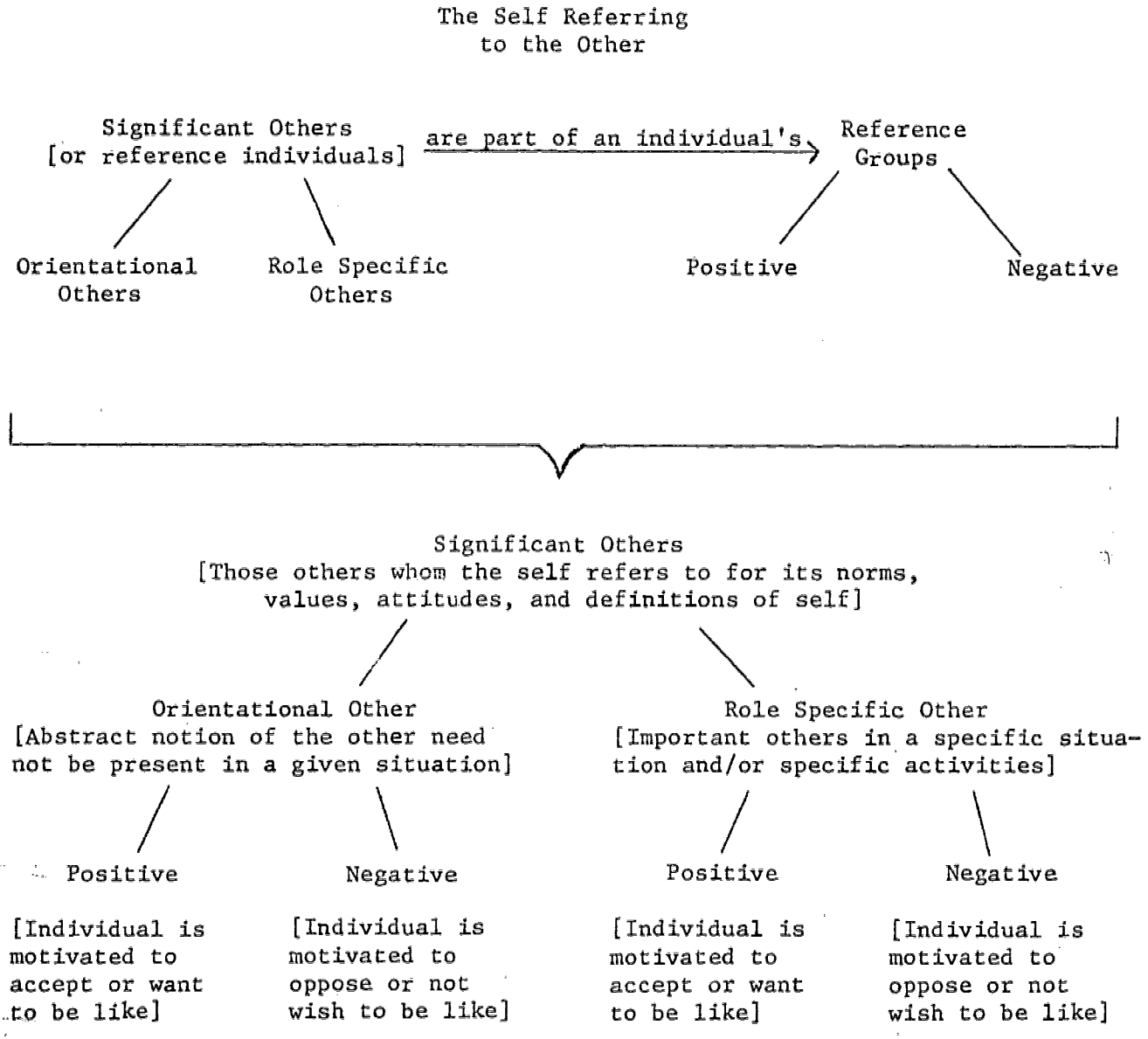

Figure 3. The Interface and Resulting Merger of the Terms Reference Group and Significant Others

Endnotes

1. This study is part of a larger empirical investigation sponsored by the Department of Sociology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061.
2. For a parallel discussion see Berger and Luckman, 1966:131-33 ff. It should be noted that they, as do others, err in their attributing the term significant other to George Herbert Mead [cf. p. 195].
3. It should be noted that Kuhn's research activity at the State University of Iowa sparked heated debates between those followers of Mead, principally Herbert Blumer, at the University of Chicago, and those followers of Kuhn. According to Meltzer and Petras (1970) this continuing debate rests, at base, upon the different methodologies employed by the two groups. However, even more basic is a differing philosophy between schools of thought which, in turn, dictates differing methodological techniques. Unfortunately, within the scope of this study, we cannot offer a more detailed discussion.
4. Moore et al., (1973:509) lend support to this argument by operationalizing the orientational other as the other important in a "transrole sense." That is the other important without regard to any specific situation. Implied, then, is an abstract notion of, as well as the possibility of a past history with, the orientational other.
5. It should be stressed that Denzin does not mention Mead's generalized other. If, in fact, he was implying that the generalized other is part and parcel of the role specific other, we would find this to be incorrect.
6. It should be noted that Roper and Wilks, approximately two years prior to Hyman's study, employ the term reference group. However, Hyman, due to his major focus on the term, is, for the most part, credited with its inception (cf. Hyman, 1942:8; Merton, 1957:284; and Kuhn, 1972:175).

7. A fact ignored by many is that Hyman also dealt with the concept of a "reference individual" which, in the same manner as the reference group, can be used as a frame of comparison for the individual (Hyman, 1942:15). While Hyman's results on this point are less than clear, it would nevertheless appear to be the case that in some instances a person's reference individual is a germane part of his larger reference group(s) (Hyman, 1942: 23-29). It is felt that this idea lends some credence to the claim that an interface can be established between the reference group and significant other concepts. Hence, it will be more fully explored in that section of the paper.

8. On this point see also, Sherif and Sherif, 1969:418; and, Sherif, 1969:285.

9. In this discussion, any third function that reference groups might serve has been ignored. The reasoning behind this decision is that there is much disagreement as to what the third function is or if it even exists (cf. Shibutani, 1972:163; and Merton, 1957:283).

10. Hyman and Singer (1968:8), although stating the fact less emphatically, concur that the two types of reference groups may not always be distinct.

11. An important point to note is that the reference group concept, because it points to both real and imaginary groups, defies any ideal-typical classification as an elaboration of either Mead's generalized other or the categoric other. Evidentally it can be both. Therefore, in order to simplify the schema as much as possible, we did not include this complicating factor.

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