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Q5(b)

Explain G.H. Mead's idea of development of 'self' through the 'generalised other'.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- **State Mead's self as a social process:** I and Me, significant others, **play and game**
- Explain the **generalised other** as the organised community attitudes the person takes toward herself
- Keep development of self as the centre

Revision summary

Mead's self arises in interaction through language and role-taking.

The Me is internalised attitudes of others; the I is the spontaneous reply.

Play takes one role at a time; the game takes an organised set of roles.

The **generalised other** is the community's organised attitude in the person.

Moral self-control depends on seeing one's act from that group standpoint.

Multiple communities can give a person more than one **generalised other**.

Introduction

George Herbert Mead argued that the self is not a thing one is born with. It arises in social interaction through language and role-taking. The child first meets significant others, then learns to take the attitude of a whole community. That organised attitude is the **generalised other**. Through it the person can become an object to herself and can act with a social self.

Body

Self as process: I, Me, **play and game**

Mead distinguished the **I** and the **Me**. The Me is the organised set of attitudes of others that one has taken in. The I is the spontaneous response to that Me. The self is the conversation of the two. Charles Horton Cooley's looking-glass self sits nearby: we imagine how we appear to others. Mead made the mechanism more precise through gestures and **significant symbols**, especially language.

In the **play stage the child takes the role of particular others, one at a time: parent, teacher, hero. In the game** stage the child must take several roles at once, as in a team sport where each position answers the others. Only then does a fully social self become possible. Herbert Blumer later named this family of ideas symbolic interactionism.

The generalised other

The **generalised other** is the community's organised attitudes as they live in the person. It is not one neighbour. It is the rules of the game, the law, the school, the caste public, or the nation as the child comes to feel them. When a person asks "what would people say?", the **generalised other** is at work. Moral responsibility, for Mead, depends on this ability to take the group's standpoint toward one's own act. The self is therefore developed from the outside in, through communication, and then becomes a source of inner control.

Indian socialisation studies can use this idea without copying Chicago. A child learns the Me of family honour, school discipline and, later, a professional code. Conflict among several generalised others, such as village caste and city workplace, is a Meadian problem of modern selfhood. Erving Goffman's later dramaturgy shows performance; Mead remains the account of how the self is formed so that performance is possible.

Flow diagram

Significant others -> Play stage
Play stage -> Game stage
Game stage -> Generalised other
Generalised other -> Me
Me -> I responds responds
I responds -> Self as process

Conclusion

Mead's self develops through role-taking, from particular others in play to the organised community in the game. The **generalised other** is that community attitude internalised. The person becomes a self by learning to look at herself as the group looks at her.

Facts & figures

Significant symbols

Gestures, especially language, that mean the same to self and other and make role-taking possible.

Play and game

Mead's two stages of role-taking, from particular others to the organised team or community.

Generalised other

The organised attitudes of the group, taken by the person toward her own conduct.