Social psychology for Mead is the discipline that "studies the activity or behavior of the individual as it lies within the social process. The behavior of an individual can be understood only in terms of the behavior of the whole social group of which he is a member, since his individual acts are involved in larger, social acts which go beyond himself and which implicate the other members of that group." While earlier social psychology had dealt with social experience from the individual psychological standpoint, Mead suggested that individual experience be dealt with "from the standpoint of society, at least from the standpoint of communication as essential to the social order." His social psychology presupposed "an approach to experience from the standpoint of the individual," and was therefore at variance with Watsonian behaviorism, but it undertook "to determine in particular that which belongs to this experience because the individual himself belongs to a social structure, a social order."

Mead argued that there can be no self apart from society, no consciousness of self and no communication. In its turn, society must be understood as a structure that emerges through an ongoing process of communicative social acts, through transactions between persons who are mutually oriented toward each other.

Mead saw in gesture the key mechanism through which social acts are effected. But he sharply separates non-significant (unself-conscious) gestures, as found on the animal level, from the significant (self-conscious) gestures that characterize most human intercourse. On the animal level, gesture involves an immediate response to a stimulus. The growling advance of dog A is a stimulus to dog B to react by attack or withdrawal, as the case may be. In contrast, at the human level of communication, significant gestures come into play. These rest upon "an arousal in the individual himself of the response which he is calling out in the other individual, a taking of the role of the other, a tendency to act as the other person acts." Significant gestures are based on linguistic symbols carrying a content that is more or less the same for different individuals and hence meaning the same thing to them all. Animals do not put themselves in the position of others predicting, in effect "He will act in such a way and I will act in this way." They cannot be said to "think." Human thought arises when there are "symbols, vocal gestures generally, which arouse in the individual himself the response which he is calling out in the other, and such that from the point of view of that response he is able to direct his later conduct." Significant gestures involving the use of symbols always presuppose the ability of each participant in a communicative process to visualize his own performance from the standpoint of the others, to take the role of the others. In non-symbolic interaction human beings, like animals, respond directly to one another. In symbolic interaction, where they use significant gestures, they interpret each other’s attitudes and act on the basis of the meaning yielded by such interpretations. As Blumer puts it, "Symbolic interaction involves interpretation, or ascertaining the meaning of the actions or remarks of the other person, and definition, or conveying indications to another person as to how he is to act." Human communicative processes involve the constant self-conscious adjustment of actors to the conduct of others, a repeated fitting together of lines of action through definitions and redefinitions, interpretations and reinterpretations.
Following William James, Mead argues that consciousness must be understood as a thought-stream arising in the dynamic relationship between a person and his environment, more particularly his social environment. "Mental phenomena," he reasoned, cannot be reduced "to conditioned reflexes and similar physiological mechanisms," as the behaviorists would have it, but neither can they be understood in terms of the insulated conception of the Cartesian ego. Experience is not first individual and then social. Each individual is continually involved in a succession of joint enterprises with others, which form and shape his mind. Consciousness is not a given; it is emergent.

*From Coser, 1977:334-335.*

**Symbolic Interactionism** (from http://www.webref.org/sociology/s/symbolic_interactionism.htm)

A theoretical school or orientation in sociological social psychology. An approach that has evolved principally from social behaviorism and the writings of George Herbert Mead and stresses the symbolic nature of human interaction, linguistic and gestural communication (all reality is held to be communicated reality), and particularly the role of language in the formation of mind, self, and society. In sum, social reality and human behavior, for the symbolic interactionist, is conceptualized as symbolic, communicated, and subjective in both form and content.