**Significant Other: From Whence to Where**

After consulting with Professor Jack Spencer, who was initially inclined to attribute the concept to Ralph Turner and the role theorists, he and I followed separate paths to the same conclusion. Mead talks of “others” and Cooley talks of ‘primary groups,” but it appears that the term, “significant other,” was coined by Harry Stack Sullivan, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*, (Washington, D.C.: W. A. White Psychiatric Foundation, 1940).

My source on this is Manford H. Kuhn, “The Reference Group Reconsidered.” *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter, 1964), pp. 5-21, who cites Sullivan and advises us, “See especially pp. 18-22,” (Kuhn 1964, p. 8, n10).

Turner and Shibutani are also cited as pioneers in this area (both published in AJS in 1956 and 1955, respectively—see Kuhn 1964, p. 6, n2). It is worth noting, however, that both are discussing reference group theory, and that Merton (1968 [1949] in the assigned readings) uses the term “significant other” in his discussion of Mead, implying that Mead considered the significant others to be most important in the development of the “me.”

This assertion and the attribution of the term to Mead or Cooley might be rooted in Merton, although Kuhn 1964 and Denzin 1966 (both of whom are now on the website) make it clear that Mead and Cooley were important influences on what they consider to be the academic career of the concept, “significant other.”

Nevertheless, Kuhn (1964) was a structural symbolic interactionist, as his parrying with Blumer in his opening comments suggest. Sullivan (1940) deserves credit for the term, but we do not have his 1940 edition in the HSSE library, and even the second edition is in remote storage, so I will leave this search for sources in your hands—interested students. The discovery of remote storage should be part of your graduate education.

Also, reference theory and role theory clearly were part of a more structural symbolic interactionism, which almost seems closer to structural functionalism if not exchange theory. It is interesting in this regard to trace the term to Merton and to Turner and Kuhn. I also found some references in social psychology texts, in argument that viewed “significant others” as those with resources—clearly indicating an exchange perspective.

My impression, initially, was that the term came from exchange as opposed to interactionist theory, but I now think that it has been appropriated by both camps to indicate two different ways of thinking about status. One way is to return to Cooley and the primary group (the SI path). The other is to return to Merton (and Stouffer) and reference group theory, which comes to be a different way of thinking about self in relation to other, in evaluating who gets the goodies. This is, in my opinion, closer to exchange theory, but role theory might be an attempt to bridge the gap between Merton (1968) and Blumer (1969) with a structural symbolic interactionism that Blumer clearly rejected, at least in his early work.

Thus you have a source (Sullivan 1940) and some references to the more recent literature (Kuhn 1964 and Denzin 1966), where rich bibliographies could help you to fill in the gaps. Since my copy of Merton (1968) is in my office, it is hard to be certain, but I believe that the first edition of that book was published in 1949, which gives him precedence over Turner (1956) and Shibutani (1955) (both cited in Kuhn 1964).

Beyond the objective facticity of publication dates (which might still be subject to interpretation), I think that any further analysis of interpretation of the meaning of “significant other” should be entrusted to a social psychologist. Jack Spencer is probably your best bet here at Purdue. Otherwise, Sheldon Stryker (emeritus IU Bloomington) would be an excellent source, although he is also a structural symbolic interactionist—of the Indiana School, as opposed to the Iowa School structural symbolic interactionism of Kuhn). Do you see why you need a course in social psychology? It is complicated.