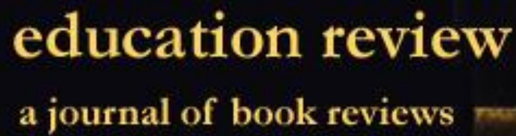

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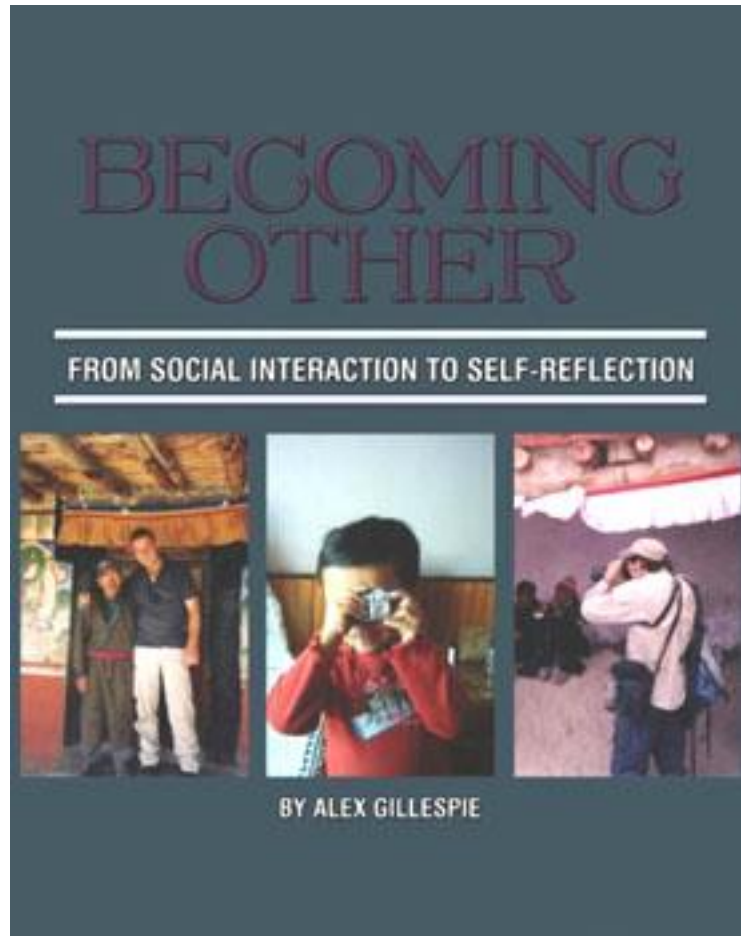
Alex Gillespie's *Becoming Other: From Social Interaction to Self-Reflection* considers how self-reflection can be explained through G.H. Mead's conceptions of the social act and the significant symbol. Gillespie forages into the relatively untouched wilderness of utilizing Mead's thinking in empirical research, specifically in social psychology. He does so by mapping the discourses of two disparate cultures that meet in the social act of tourism. Gillespie is "interested in how this interaction between two radically different groups has triggered mutual self-reflection, and the

emergence of new situated identities" (p. ix). Furthermore, he aims to explain through Mead the seemingly arbitrary, spontaneous way we "'step out' of ongoing action and self-reflect" (p. x).



The book is roughly composed of five parts (although not formally designated as such). First is the exposition and elaboration of Mead's theory and an exploration of the "utility of the theory" (p.27) in empirical research. Here he discusses the concepts of the significant symbol and of the social act. Second, he uses the social act to conceptualize tourist-Ladakhi encounters in Ladakh, India. Third, he maps the discourses of tourists and Ladakhis as they each talk about themselves and the other. Fourth, he carries out genealogical and microdynamic analyses of the discourses. In the former, he traces how social positions and their sustained perspectives are constructed. In the latter, he explores the dynamics of self-reflection, "showing how taking the perspective of the other can trigger the emergence of a new 'me' and how instances of self-reflection can in fact be made explicable in terms of perspective taking" (p. 255). Finally, he offers a way of understanding the seemingly arbitrary, spontaneous way we "'step out' of ongoing action and self-reflect" (p. x).

An approximate account of the argument is as follows. First, Gillespie tells us that self-reflection occurs through taking the social position of the other, where "self" becomes an object for itself. Self-reflection in each case arises in the social acts, which "are institutionalized patterns of action, containing social positions each of which sustains a different perspective" (p. 19). Social positions sustain perspectives and can be exchanged in any social act. In the social act of photography, for example, there must be both the photographer and the photographed. If a tourist photographer is reflecting upon how his subject might perceive him, he recalls what it felt like for him when he was in that social position of the photographed. But, Gillespie asks, what causes the photographer to reflect at all?

Alex Gillespie

To answer this, he invokes the concept of significant symbols, which, following Mead, are "words, or vocal gestures, which evoke two or more perspectives within a social act (p. 19) … in its most minimal form, the integration of at least two different perspectives" (p. 20). For example, Gillespie offers us the example of giving and receiving. There are two divergent social positions, the receiver and the giver. However, the present – the thing that goes between giver and receiver – is shared and thus acts as a bridge between the two perspectives of the positions. Another example is that of an ant's pheromone trail to food. Gillespie explains, "From a Meadian perspective, the ant's pheromone trail a symbol, but not a significant symbol. The pheromone trail does call out the response for food, but it does not call out a complementary response…evoking a significant symbol is thus *evoking the whole social act from all of the perspectives embedded within it*" (p. 268; italics original).

Finally, Gillespie assesses rupture theories, feedback theories, and internalization theories as explanations for his data. He finds that the other theories fail because they leave unanswered the question of how one suddenly takes the perspective of the other without any prompting from an other through feedback, through an internalized other, or through rupture of path of action. It is not the mere accounting for self-reflection that concerns Gillespie, but how self-reflection spontaneously arises. To him, the other theories start too late – after a self-reflective awareness has arisen. In other words, the other theories do not answer the questions: "why should a Ladakhi while passionately arguing for modernization suddenly change topic and say that Ladakh must preserve its culture? Why should a tourist while engaged in criticizing other tourist photographers suddenly turn and see herself as one of 'them'?" (p. 267). He successfully accounts for the seemingly arbitrary distancing of the self into reflection through Mead's concept of the significant symbol, which forces upon the self that makes the vocal gesture to call into awareness all perspectives accounted for in the significant symbol uttered. He writes, "The change in perspectives is not arbitrary, it has a logic…In self-reflective thought…'the lines of association follow the lines of the [social] act'" (Mead, 1934, p.18).

Furthermore, by using Mead's significant symbol and social act as theoretical anchors, Gillespie places newly situated identities in the field of cultural resources and social positions. By doing so, he is able to retain cultural and context specificity in drawing out the boundaries of the social positions one takes in self-reflection while at the same time circumventing the necessity to also claim a fragmented self composed of these multiple situated identities. We see in the analysis that these new situated identities are not left radically separated from the consciousness that perceives them but are necessarily integrated into and by the self from which new identities sprang and through the cultural resources and social positions of the self whence it sprang. For example, take the case when self that speaks from self-is-traveler suddenly reflects from the social position of another and perceives self as itself as self-as-tourist. These social positions, traveler and tourist, are positions occupied by and regulated through the same, cohesive self.

Gillespie's *Becoming Other: From Social Interaction to Self-reflection* is successful in offering a cogent explanation for the relationship between self-reflection and the social act. His original question leads him in many directions, all of which are important dimensions of the "how" of the interaction that leads to new situated identities. He draws attention to the limits of perspective taking, the intracultural self-other dynamics, the intercultural self-other dynamics, and the origins of the discourses within which the social acts. Within each of these, more nuances are found and successfully problematized. Gillespie does present all of these nuances and dimensions to the

reader; however transitions between sections are sometimes abrupt, and it is not always clear why the author finds each section important to answering the central question. Sometimes it is clear how Gillespie is exploring “how this interaction between two radically different groups has triggered mutual self-reflection, and the emergence of new situated identities,” while at other times it seems to this reader that he moves away from this question by exploring how interaction *within* a group triggers self-reflection. This confuses the original question by opening a path of questioning that leads the reader away from the focus of the analysis and interferes with the power it. Finally, although Gillespie’s argument regarding the significant symbol is convincing, the discussion on situated identities seems to be left undeveloped. However, these relatively minor criticisms say little of the intellectual contribution Gillespie’s makes. For educational researchers, Gillespie’s study would be helpful in answering questions about how the dominant themes of reflection of teachers are connected within the social act of teaching and how new situated identities of the student and of the teacher are formed and integrated. Furthermore, because his inquiry is grounded in a social act integrating two radically different groups, it might also inform educational researchers in understanding the social act of schooling and the ensuing dynamics of self-reflection when teachers and students are of radically different backgrounds. In general, his book offers us an important way to think about self-reflection as embedded in social interaction – a theory that can more fully account for the way in which we suddenly step out of ourselves and into the position of the other.

About the Reviewer

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Seamus Mulryan is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, where he specializes in philosophy of education. He earned his MA in Philosophy & Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and he has worked in public and private school settings in both teaching and administrative positions. His current work is in conceptions of human development and in the educative dimensions of cross-cultural dialogue.

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