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FOREWORD
Italian Translation of Mirrors and Masks

Anselm L. Strauss's lovely theoretical essay, *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity*, continues to delight seasoned scholars and new students across disciplines and across the globe. It has become a classic statement of symbolic interactionist and pragmatist social psychology and a leading exemplar of what is commonly called the Chicago school of sociology.[1] Strauss first published this book in 1959, although he had developed many of its central ideas by 1953 and circulated early versions amongst his graduate students at the University of Chicago.[2] *Mirrors and Masks* represents Strauss's first major effort to work out the sociological implications of the pragmatist/interactionist traditions.

To grasp the significance of *Mirrors and Masks*, we need to be aware of its intellectual antecedents, locate it within North American sociological concerns of the 1950s, and discern how its central ideas have endured. As an exemplar of 20th century American social psychology in the pragmatist tradition, the book simultaneously anchored symbolic interactionism in its pragmatist foundations and served as a major source of its future development. *Mirrors and Masks* took symbolic interactionism further theoretically than earlier texts, notably Lindesmith and Strauss's (1949), *Social Psychology*.

Social scientists often view Strauss as a direct descendent of pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead (1934) through Herbert Blumer, Strauss's teacher at the University of Chicago, and through Strauss's (1956) own edited volume of Mead's work on social psychology. However, as is clear in *Mirrors and Masks* as well as in his later writings, Strauss's intellectual heritage included but went beyond Blumer. Strauss (1996) himself pointed out that his was only "a partial line of descent" from Blumer. Strübing (2018, emphasis in original) further asserts that Strauss "shifted the Blumerian emphasis from *symbolic* interaction to a more material view of sociality as situated activity"---action---"thereby blurring the somewhat artificial separation of action from structure."

Specifically, Strauss's analysis of identity draws heavily on John Dewey, whom he had read before beginning his graduate studies at the University of Chicago. Dewey's influence is quite explicit in *Mirrors and Masks*, and remains present, although often implicit, in Strauss's later empirical works. His reliance on Dewey again becomes evident as Strauss develops and integrates his theory of action in his capstone book, *Continual Permutations of Action* (1993).

In *Mirrors and Masks*, Strauss uses the concept of identity as a new way to explore, analyze, appraise, and organize key ideas and theoretical questions in social psychology. From the start, he treats identity as an elusive concept that dynamically involves both self appraisals and appraisals of self by others and more. Strauss treats identity as a "sensitizing concept" *par excellence*, consistent with Herbert Blumer's (1954/1969) depiction. Blumer viewed sensitizing concepts as theoretical but without specification of definitive attributes or characteristics. Such concepts do not have precise referents or exact benchmarks. Instead, they offer a general sense of what is important to engage. Thus, sensitizing concepts provide *points of departure* that open analytic possibilities rather than serving as constructs to apply directly and concretely to data. Thus, Blumer's approach to theorizing stands in marked contrast to the deductive theorizing that animated logical-deductive hypothesis-testing research then common among functionalist sociologists.

The logical-deductive model of conducting research had become widespread in the United States [hereafter US] by the early 1950s when Strauss and Blumer were writing their respective works. Sensitizing concepts allow seeing and understanding social life in ways that otherwise might remain invisible. Strauss used the concept of identity to allow and abet the emergence of new theoretical insights to account for social processes and to make their symbolic and social organizational underpinnings visible. Strauss's open-ended and emergent way of using the concept of identity exemplifies both its strength and his own skill in exploring the questions and problems arising through analyzing it more sociologically.[3] In fact, Maines and Charlton (1985) viewed *Mirrors and Masks* as a turning point in interactionism becoming fully sociological (Strübing 2018).

While at the University of Chicago, Strauss wrote his master's thesis under Blumer, adding other contemporary intellectual influences. Blumer was a charismatic teacher and an exacting critic of his students' work, including of Strauss's thesis. , He required Strauss to rewrite the thesis numerous times, which led to Strauss to seek additional mentors. Strauss did not claim to use identity as a sensitizing concept in *Mirrors and Masks*, although his exegesis on identity exemplifies a masterful application of this approach. Perhaps Strauss's exploration of identity ultimately taught Blumer something about detecting patterns through using an open-ended theoretical concept.

Significant here, both the mode of analysis and the form of Strauss's argument in *Mirrors and Masks* contrasted markedly with conventional discussions of identity of the 1950s in the US. At that time, psychiatry and psychology took center stage with analyses of personality. This concept imposed a set of preconceptions that rendered identity a static concept, brought determinism into empirical analyses, and treated the first six years of life as forming who the person was and would be. Strauss's analysis of identity directly challenged earlier deterministic treatments of the concept. He carefully noted that his symbolic interactionist standpoint and starting point differed from these analyses and allowed him to take a fresh view of the concept of identity. Strauss argued that to understand identity, a more detailed analysis of interaction was necessary. For Strauss, identity emerged *through* social interaction, and any conceptualization of identity had to be somehow embedded in social organizational phenomena.

Strauss's arguments in *Mirrors and Masks* also stand in contrast to the reigning theoretical framework, structural functionalism that dominated sociology and other social sciences at mid-century in the US. Structural-functionalism adopted a physiological model and viewed society as an organic system. It emphasized maintaining equilibrium between and within its component parts--- social institutions. Functionalism assumed a static view of a homogenous society and sought to explain social structure, not social change. Key here, this theoretical perspective invoked a conception of society *unchecked by empirical evidence*.

In contrast, *Mirrors and Masks* offered a markedly different perspective and an approach to actually studying social life. Strauss (1) posits a dynamic, changing society; (2) assumes agentic actors who have some choice in directing their actions; (3) emphasizes the significance of self appraisals and appraisals by others in shaping meanings and actions; and (4) treats social psychology and social structure as integrated, not separate. Contemporary readers could easily miss the strength of Strauss's arguments against functionalism for two reasons. One, his own approach was quite gentle. And second, his arguments are couched in a common Chicago school style of his day. At that time, some scholars took an indirect style of engagement with intellectual adversaries. Whether one's position prevailed depended on the strength of the arguments made and the evidence presented, not on explicit debate with the opposing position. For Strauss, what always mattered was the cogency and persuasiveness of one's own ideas and research, not the dismantling of others' work.[4]

The emphasis on social organization as integral to identity distinguished Strauss's analysis from preceding work on the concept, much of which was written under and subsumed by the concept of personality, as noted above. Hence, Strauss's analysis constituted a major departure from earlier theoretical treatments of identity in psychiatry, psychology and the social sciences, including the work of the many sociologists who subscribed to structural-functionalism. In addition to Strauss's statement of his position, it is important to note that the concept of personality had also permeated significant threads of scholarship in sociology and anthropology. Strauss's analysis of identity brought process, meaning, collective affiliations, and social organization into fresh purview. Later commenting on *Mirrors and Masks*, Strauss argued that "social psychology has to go hand in hand with organizational aspects and vice versa" (interview with Strauss in Davis 2011:21).

Strauss asserted that long-standing problems in social psychology take different shape when viewed from a symbolic interactionist perspective. Identity becomes a dynamic concept that develops through the crucial role of language and interaction. Symbolic interaction assumes that social life is open-ended and not always predictable. Indeterminancy, Strauss argued, must be taken into account.

The strikingly original analysis of the role of language in thought and action in *Mirrors and Masks* further reveals the magnitude of Strauss's contribution. Here he built on Dewey and Bentley's (1949) analysis of naming to explore relationships about how naming shaped knowing. Strauss tells us that names are containers in which the namer pours his or her evaluations, whether conscious or unwitting (p. 15). Consistent with Dewey and Bentley, Strauss writes "to name is to know" (p. 18). This deceptively simple statement holds multiple

meanings and implications. To name someone or something not only is a way of identifying a type or way of locating a person, group, object or event, but also signifies the namer's understanding and experience of what is named. Naming both shapes experience and is embedded in it. What we know and how we know it relies on naming. It reveals the relationship(s) between the viewer and the viewed as co-constitutive.

Naming indicates a series of relationships to the namer, to other people, and to the world. Thus, language plays a crucial role in human behavior and in the complex weaving of subjective and social identities. Through naming, individuals locate, evaluate, and understand self and others as well as objects and events. In short, language enables us to weave our subjective and social identities together and to shape our behavior.

Furthermore, naming involves *classification*, a major social process which both marks boundaries and directs actions. In turn, classification also elicits expectations for the future and remembrances of the past. This point reflects Strauss's awareness of temporality and its significance for meaning and action.[5] Like Blumer (1969), Strauss argues that classifications do not reside in the object addressed. Instead, the classification a person makes of this object arises from a perspective. When perspectives differ, classifications of the same object also differ. Classifications do not stand alone but are related to other classifications and thus, however implicitly, assume connections to these related classifications. Strauss's students later pursued studies of classification as well.[6]

Through his analysis of classification, Strauss punctures positivist conceptions of knowledge. He states, "It would appear that classification, knowledge and value are inseparable" (p. 25). Positivist claims to the separation between fact and value subsequently dissolve, as does any presumed objectivity of the scientist. Whether overt or tacit, naming involves evaluation. Hence, naming something, placing it in a classification system, and evaluating it all blur together. Although Strauss does not fully elaborate this point, evaluations involve values, attachments, and commitments, all of which are played out in actions.

Strauss's insights about renaming a phenomenon reveal the freshness and fluidity of pragmatist thought. He argues that renaming also amounts to a reassessment of one's relationship to the thing named. Therefore, an individual's evaluations of this phenomenon and actions toward it also change. Yet such evaluations and actions do not exist in a social vacuum. Processes of naming and renaming are thus *inherently* social and occur in and through interaction. Rather than being static and fixed, people's evaluations change as their experience changes. Subsequently our classifications and actions shift and change.

Throughout his career, Strauss continued to develop the analysis of action that he so clearly began to articulate in *Mirrors and Masks*. His portrayal of action assumes human agency and its reliance on naming and, by extension, classification. Action and agency are inseparable, fundamental elements of Strauss's sociological research and theorizing. Significantly, both action and agency can be discerned through careful observation of empirical events. Strauss's perspective on agency and action clearly brought an alternative perspective to sociology from that provided by structural-functionalists. They dismissed first-hand qualitative research and

discounted theorizing from observations or interviews. Yet Strauss's perceptive and very social analysis of identity could not be easily disregarded.

The issues and concepts that Strauss introduced in *Mirrors and Masks* presaged intellectual questions that engaged him throughout his career. Concepts of identity, interaction, biography, motivation, careers, social organization, status passage, process, indeterminacy, development, and transformation stand out in this short volume. Similarly, key components of his method also took initial form in the book. The book testifies to the strengths of open-ended theoretical analysis. It is a masterpiece of theoretically-driven analysis of empirical questions in social psychology that, in turn, produces theoretically-grounded concepts and insights. Thus the constant comparative method was evident in Strauss's analysis of identity long before it appeared as a major component of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

In contrast to conceptions of human development in psychiatry and psychology, Strauss quite radically contended that identity changes occur throughout life, as relationships are reconstituted by actions. Action, appraisal, and process are continual. Acts begin *before* their overt expression (p. 51). The structure of an act includes assessments of the situation, the people involved, and oneself. A person's initial impression of another individual's identity outlines the act to follow, but subsequent events can alter or confirm a particular line of action. Because another person's appraisal of one's self could change, changes in one's self-appraisal may also follow. An act can take into account multiple sources of appraisal. A person's referent for constructing action can include invisible actors, such as those in groups to which this person belongs and therefore ensuing interactions also reflect social organization. Strauss captured this significant point in his statement that, "Interaction is both structural process and interpersonal process" (p. 75).

Strauss encapsulated his perspective in three significant words: "Involvements are evolvements" (p. 37). Here he is asserting that what we do becomes part of who we are. Commitments shape one's paths and guide one's steps in daily life. Problematic situations not only elicit questions about the people with whom we interact, but also challenge who we are in these situations. As a result, significant shifts and changes in identity can occur as individuals encounter new situations.

Essentially, Strauss's social psychology declared that human development is a lifelong process, a point followed up by students of Strauss.[7] Although his perspective was unusual 1959, it has become taken for granted in current conceptions of aging and human development. At a time when psychiatrists and psychologists concentrated on the first six years of life, Strauss countered that an interest in personal identity also required examining changes in adult life. "Turning points" may be individually constructed or institutionalized rites. Regardless they mark the status passages experienced across one's life.

Being coached on how to proceed is often part of a status passage. Strauss pointed out that the relationship between the coach and novice may be characterized by risk, trust, faith, and/or danger. The interactions that ensue then shape subsequent commitments and careers. Commitment is one concept that Strauss, along with others (e.g., Becker 1960) later developed

as part of the symbolic interactionist lexicon. Careers is another, later expanded by Strauss (1993:52-57) to encompass trajectories. The substantial influence of Everett C. Hughes's (1958, 1971a,b) work on Strauss clearly took root in *Mirrors and Masks* with its growing ecological understanding of interaction in organizational environments (Strübing 2018). And it later grew in Strauss's many studies of work and social organizational concerns (e.g., Star, 1991).

Through his analysis of language and naming, Strauss also demonstrated his awareness of the importance of being labeled long before the labeling theory of deviant behavior emerged and captured the interest of symbolic interactionists and others in the 1960s. While Strauss certainly acknowledged the significance of being labeled, his analysis goes much deeper than labeling theory when we consider knowing and being. Without explicitly making this claim, Strauss set forth a perspective that the significance of naming and knowing is much greater than simply attaching labels to behavior. Rather, Strauss's analysis illuminates how naming shapes consciousness, indicates the scope and content of understanding, and forecasts actions.

Strauss was among the first sociologists to link identity with biography.[8] He saw the earlier life histories done by early Chicago school sociologists as ways of chronicling biography. Similarly, he viewed his contemporaries' studies of identity as fundamentally linked to biography when these studies addressed temporality and chronology. While Strauss explicated relationships between biography and identity in *Mirrors and Masks,* they remained relatively undeveloped by other social scientist for several decades.[9] Interestingly, Strauss's exploration of identity in this short book also presaged other major concerns in the discipline, such as micro-macro arguments that emerged much later. Strauss argued that a macro sociology has micro foundations in how people see themselves. He also mentions how intricacies of interactions reflect the statuses from which a person currently acts, including the sequence of statements made during face-to-face contact. Moreover, he called for "more explicit recognition of phases *in* interaction--not merely phases *of* interaction" (p. 131). Conversational analysts and ethnomethodologists have ambitiously taken up these concerns over the past 40 years.

On a substantive level, Strauss's analysis of the significance of ethnic identity for individual and collective action remains unparalleled. Strauss revealed how deeply ethnic identity permeates human consciousness and sparks action decades before most US social and political commentators acknowledged its significance. His analysis of collective memory and personal identity is remarkably prescient. For example, he examined the interactions between a Croatian and a Serb in Rebecca West's (1940) report on Yugoslavia. Strauss not only brings history into analyses of interaction and identity, but also vividly demonstrated how interaction and identity themselves construct history.

Although *Mirrors and Masks* has found appreciative audiences over the decades, in the US, its significance was initially overshadowed by Erving Goffman's (1959) book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* In our view, several reasons contribute to the success of Goffman's book beyond its widespread availability through Anchor Books. First, Strauss's book was a theoretical essay that requires familiarity with key mid-twentieth century theoretical issues. In contrast, Goffman's empirical study introduced a way of looking at interaction accessible to

readers without theoretical interests. Second, Goffman explores taken-for-granted actions that underlie the micro dynamics of social life. He shows the underside of familiar interactions and exposes less than admirable actions supporting actors' claims to a particular self. Goffman's rather skeptical Cold War 1950s conception of a strategic actor who attempts to control interactions according to his own agendas resonated at the time with academic and general readers alike. Third, the empirical underpinnings of Goffman's study not only are explicit but illuminate life in everyday worlds. While Strauss states that he bases his essay on empirical materials, they are diffuse and less apparent than the many and lively examples that peppered *The Presentation of Self.* Fourth, Goffman's combination of irony and analysis of invisible, but telling actions and meanings make his book compelling. Both Strauss and Goffman adopt metaphors drawn from theater although Goffman sustains the metaphor of life as theatre throughout his observations and actually organizes his book around this metaphor. In contrast, Strauss takes a more fluid, emergent approach. He uses "mirrors," "masks," roles, and performances as points of departure to view identity in innovative, open and diverse ways.

In American sociology, *Mirrors and Masks* represents an important statement during a contested era of disciplinary history when behaviorism, experimentalism, and survey research were rapidly establishing dominance in US sociology. In contrast to the static view of society inherent in functionalist analyses, symbolic interactionism emphasized process and change and hence could address a dynamic society. Today this point is clear to us, but how was *Mirrors and Masks* initially received against the 1950s backdrop of increasing quantification, scientism, and functionalist theory?

Most reviews of *Mirrors and Masks* were penned by sociologists; however, the book attracted some attention in psychology and psychiatry. The eminent American psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, commented on the book for the *AMA Archives of General Psychiatry.* Several sociological reviews in the US indicate the level of agreement and kind of questions *Mirrors and Masks* evoked. William D. Ames (1960) correctly observed that the book aimed to fuse an explicit, systematic theory of social psychology with social organization that was founded in symbolic interactionism. Melvin Seeman (1960) concurred. However, he questioned whether and to what extent symbolic interactionism had a place in the development of social psychology and criticized the (then) lack of empirical research flowing from this perspective. A close reading of Seeman's review leads one to wonder if his questions about research may have stemmed from the widespread skepticism about symbolic interactionism and qualitative research among 1950s sociologists, often functionalists.

Taking a more appreciative tone, Norman R. Jackson's (1960) review acknowledged the lack of research but took a much more positive stance toward the prospects of a symbolic interactionist social psychology. Jackson argued that validation or refinement of the concepts in the book "is eagerly awaited by all those who share the author's belief that symbolic interactionism is the most comprehensive theory of human behavior presently available" (p. 260). Other reviewers saw major strengths in the book, yet to us each missed the mark in an important way. While Helen Merrell Lynd (1960) approved of Strauss's emphasis on language, she disapproved of his lack of emphasis on the unique aspects of personal identity. Thus she wholly missed or misunderstood Strauss's purpose. Moving beyond the psychological analyses

of the day toward a more sociological social psychology, and also placing identity development and change within interaction, social relationships and institutional venues was Strauss's main point.

The harshest criticism came from the sociologist most closely aligned with Strauss's perspective, P.M. Strong (1979), a British medical sociologist. In the United Kingdom, neither the rush towards quantification, nor the call of functionalism had taken root. Hence, Strong's criticism came from another direction and at a much later date. Strong had begun to adopt symbolic interactionism a decade after publication of *Mirrors and Masks* in 1959 and became acquainted with the book at that time. Strong's combined review of *Mirrors and Masks* and *Anguish: A Case History of a Dying Trajectory* (Strauss and Glaser, 1970) marked the publication of both volumes by a British publisher and thus appeared 20 years after *Mirrors and Masks* was first published in the US.

Strong concedes the usefulness of *Mirrors and Masks* for beginning students and for understanding personal change but attacks Strauss's analysis of situations and structures as weak. He uses *Anguish* to confirm his criticisms of *Mirrors and Masks.* Strong's caustic remarks may be apt for *Anguish* which lacks the careful analysis and strong empirical foundation of Strauss earlier books. But we find his criticisms unduly harsh and misplaced vis-à-vis *Mirrors and Masks.* Strong wholly overlooks how Strauss treats personal identities as embedded in social interactions and organizational processes. Moreover, he asserts that Strauss posits the individual as the fundamental unit of analysis. Here Strong is simply wrong. Action was Strauss's fundamental unit of analysis in *Mirrors and Masks* and remained so throughout his career. In fact, his capstone book (Strauss 1993) is titled *Continual Permutations of Action*!

Strong also mocks Strauss's American worldview as imbued with "cheery Protestantism" with its optimism. While the book does reflect an American consciousness and worldview, we view its implications differently. We see this optimism as embedded in Chicago school pragmatism, its assumptions about process and change, and its hopefulness about democracy and progress, however naive. To us, the open-ended, fluid depiction of identity, interaction and social life in *Mirrors and Masks* is inspiring and contrasts vividly with the heavy hand of structural-functionalism dominating mid-twentieth century US sociology and beyond.[10]

In the introduction to the 1997 Transaction edition of *Mirrors and Masks,* Strauss offers three main reasons for republishing the book almost 40 years after the first edition. First, *Mirrors and Masks* took a critical—and early---stance against functionalism and positivism. Second, the book previewed Strauss's later concerns and writings. Third, the book integrates social organization and social interaction processually and structurally in innovative and deeply interactionist ways.

Strauss (1997:2) further argued that understanding individual identity relies on understanding collective activity and thus entails developing an historical and sociological social psychology rather than a more psychological social psychology. Our own assessments echo his reasons. Strauss wrote this introduction just a few months before he died in 1996. He put

earlier criticisms of *Mirrors and Masks* to rest and claimed its rightful place in the history of sociology in general and in interactionism.

In a 1980 interview, Strauss himself (Davis 2011:22) viewed *Mirrors and Masks* as having two parts. First is "the summation of my social psychological period" before 1952, the rest being "my reworking of the Everett Hughes occupational tradition---putting together social psychology and social organization---plus an historical interest." Published when he was about 40, *Mirrors and Masks* was thus Strauss's major statement on social psychology. Across the remaining thirty years of his career, he elaborated the social organizational facets of his sociology alluded to in *Mirrors and Masks*---his "reworking of the Everett Hughes occupational tradition." These include his concepts and theorizing of social worlds and arenas (e.g., Strauss 1978, 1982b, 1984), the negotiated order and processual ordering (1979, 1982a, 1993), his beautiful sociology of work (e.g., Strauss 1988a; Strauss et al. 1985/1997), and finally, his fully pragmatist interactionist theory of action (Strauss 1993; Strübing 2018). The seeds of all lay in *Mirrors and Masks* and Strauss relied on it empirically and theoretically in the rest of his work.

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[1] See e.g., Fine (1993, 1995), Abbott (1999, 2009), Bulmer (1984), Cefaï (2016), Kurtz (1984) and Plummer (1997).

[2] See the interview with Strauss in Davis (2011:19-23).

[3] On this point, see also Baszanger (1998) and Strübing (2018).

[4] See also, Strauss (1997). For a contrasting style of argumentation, see Blumer (1969).

[5] Mead's (1932) analysis of time had a profound influence on Strauss, who concurred with Mead's view that present meanings and actions shape how an individual reconstructs the past and imagines the future.

[6] See e.g., Bowker and Star (1999) and Clarke and Casper (1996).

[7] See e.g., Charmaz (1991).

[8] It is interesting that C. Wright Mills' (1959) classic *The Sociological Imagination,* commonly cited for linking biography and history, was published in the same year as *Mirrors and Masks*.

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[9] *Theoretical* treatment of biography as a central and organizing concept took hold in the 1980s (e.g., Riessman 1993) and continues to be an important part of narrative analysis.

[10] British interactionists have long tended to be actively challenged by various forms of Marxist sociology which have never been as lively in the US disciplinary context.