# An understanding of the term 'looking glass self'

In his book Human Nature and the Social Order (1902), the pioneering American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley introduced, somewhat incidentally, the term “ looking-glass self.” This metaphor has since become a standard concept in American sociology with a larger meaning than Cooley himself first implied or envisioned, and with important implications in psychology, ethical studies, theories of child rearing, and other fields. Cooley meant by this term that to some degree individuals develop their identities or self-concepts, and come to understand and define themselves, by considering the ideas and reactions that they think others have about them especially others who seem significant in their lives. Thus, in the process of socialization, which is especially critical at the earlier stages of life but is always occurring, people mold their natures and personalities and assume their roles in response to their reactions to the other people in their social contexts. In that sense, according to Cooley, one’s ” self” may be said to “ mirror” social aspects that are outside oneself; it reflects society itself in many individualized ways. The concept actually implies an interacting pair of mirrors. First one imagines oneself pictured (and judged) in the mind of another; then one mirrors in one’s mind those judgments that one imagines, thus regulating one’s behavior and partially defining oneself.

What is “ reflected” in the mirror of one’s own mind includes the value systems, self- definitions, and judgments of others in the surrounding society. In this view, one’s self-development does not necessarily depend upon objective social realities; rather, it comes about because one perceives or conceives of others’ responses in certain ways. Thus the feedback that one thinks one is getting from society may actually be more important than

any objective reality outside oneself. As sociologist George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons summarized Cooley's theory in 1966, " our imaginations of self reflect our interpersonal concerns." Patricia R. Jette, writing in The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Sociology (1986), says that the " looking-glass self" theory distinguishes three separate components that contribute to the development of self: the responses of others to the individual; the individual's perception of what these responses are, were, or might be (which may differ from the actual responses); and the individual's patterned internalizing of these perceived responses so that they become parts of his or her self-concept and behavioral makeup. In this latter stage, the individual molds a self that reflects the social surroundings and people in itas she or he has subjectively perceived them.

Noting the precise way in which Cooley first used his term can help one to apply it with its original subtleties. In Human Nature and the Social Order, the term occurs in the chapter entitled " The Meaning of ' I,' " one of two chapters about " the social self." Cooley makes clear, in proposing the term " looking-glass self," that it is not intended as an absolute definition of the nature of the self but is merely one " very large and interesting" category in which the self (or the " I") is defined by its social surroundings. According to Cooley's original language, one imagines oneself appearing in some other mind, and then " the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude . . . attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self."

Cooley goes on to quote an anonymous verse couplet: " Each to each a looking-glass/ Reflects the other that doth pass." Thus Cooley's first use of

the term suggests that, in any social interaction, each of two minds is a mirror: that of a self-conscious person, and that of another person who is a reacting “ mirror.” In real life, one can imagine some interchanges, especially among social peers, as working both ways, in a balanced fashionwith each person simultaneously being both a self-conscious actor and an evaluating judge. Young people in the earlier stages of socialization, however, or people lacking in social power, would be most likely to function in the self-conscious roles, while those who are older, more powerful, or more authoritative would be most likely to be the self-assured “ judges” whose opinions matter enough for the other person to take them into account and allow them (perhaps unconsciously) to govern behavior

Social psychologists such as Tamotsu Shibutani emphasize the importance of Cooley’s ideas in the socialization process. In Shibutani’s view, the ” looking-glass self” means simply that “ each person’s orientation toward himself is a reflection of the manner in which he is treated.” Cooley noted what Read Bain confirmed in the 1930’sthat children know other people as objects, and call others by name, before they sense themselves as separate entities. Many experts agree that children see themselves as recipients of action before perceiving themselves as actors. Therefore, their evolving natures as active selves acquiring personalities will be likely to mirror the way they have been treated by others; they first gain self-identity from social interaction.

Cooley’s metaphor, like any analogy, embeds both the merit of vividness and the danger of distortion. Though McCall and Simmons call Cooley’s looking glass a “ somewhat clouded” concept, the term is commonly used by

sociologists to help explain certain aspects of the process by which all people achieve their identities, regulating and in effect fine- tuning and modulating them as they go. Most sociologists grant that Cooley's idea contains an important truth.

Applications

The generalized examples that Cooley used when he first mentioned the looking-glass self in 1902 are good beginning points for illustrating how the concept works in real life. Cooley suggests, first, that as we pass a real mirror and " see our face, figure, and dress" reflected, we are naturally interested, and we are either pleased or not, depending on whether what we see measures up to what we would like to see. Similarly, when we meet another person, we readily imagine ourselves as mirrored in that person's mind" our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on." In the next step, we find ourselves imagining what that other person's judgment of our " reflected" selves may be. The third stage triggered by this sequence is a reflective feeling in ourselves " such as pride or mortification" when we conceive of this judgment.

Cooley himself admits that the metaphor of the looking glass is not adequate to explain the second of these three componentsthat is, the subjective evaluation of the onlooker. The nature and role of the onlooker is strategic in any such hypothetical situation, because one will be concerned about the onlooker's evaluation only if that person seems somehow significant. Assuming the onlooker's importance in one's life, Cooley says, one will be ashamed to seem reticent if one knows the onlooker is straightforward; one

will not want to seem cowardly if one knows the onlooker is brave; and one will hesitate to appear gross if one knows the onlooker is refined. One may, in a certain social situation, boast to one onlooker about how one made a sharp business deal, but with some other person whom one perceives as having different social values one might try to hide the very same fact. In these senses, then, the outside mirror of the onlooker's mind actually determines the nature of one's social self, generating one's behavior and role in a given setting.

Though Cooley's examples do not imply that the whole of anyone's self is determined by the process of such interactions, one can see how generally speaking, from earliest childhood onward one is likely to shape oneself to fit what one anticipates to be the

expected judgments of those with whom one is dealing. In individual situations throughout life, even after one's identity is rather fully formed, one tends to adopt the contextual roles that one thinks of as suitable when mirrored in the minds of others. Thus in one's grandmother's living room or at a church service, one may in effect be one person, while at a basketball game one may reveal an entirely different self; this is role-playing behavior. Proud parents may discuss their children freely with other parents, but, with some degree of consciousness, they may refrain from mentioning their children when talking to someone who is childlessor who has recently lost a child in a car accident. In these cases, the looking glass of social surroundings and audience shapes one's perceived identity.

Although Cooley illustrated only interchanges between two adults and did not specifically explore the implications that his concept has for childhood socialization, the looking-glass self helps to explain early identity development: A young child tends to become a combination of the features that are approved and desired in society. Society always puts pressure on individuals to conform to its values and judgments in order to receive approval; thus humanswho generally seek acceptance and want to be well thought ofshape their social actions according to the signals they get from the social mirror into which they are always looking. Since children tend to internalize what they encounter outside themselves and to act as if it were valid and true, it is clear that those who are treated as worthwhile entities have a better chance of becoming socially productive than those who are treated with abuse or disregard. The development of negative self-concepts as children discourages individuals from acting later as if they have positive contributions to make to society.